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MAMMOTH WESTERN

Volume 4 Number 9

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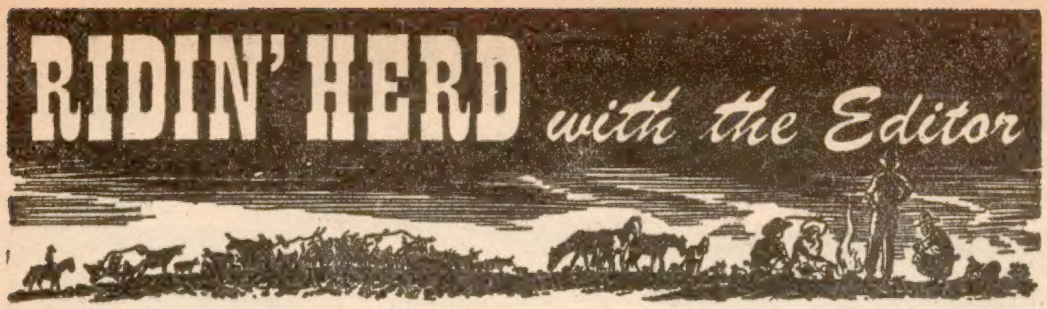


WE'RE leading off this month with a humdinger of a story. Not only that, but a $1,000 prize novel to boot! The Midwestern Writers Conference ran a contest for the best western novel and **Mammoth Western** offered a thousand smackeroos as a first prize. Well, along came "Sheepherders War" and rustled off first honors. So here, in this month's issue, "Sheepherders War", by Emile Earle, takes the lead as one of the best action-packed yarns we've presented in a long time. Whoa, now! We know what you're goin' to say—that we say this every durned month! Well, we reckon that's straight off the range all right, but from the way you've been receiving the yarns, we guess we'll kinda have to keep sayin' it! So we will. Yep, the best action-packed novels lead off every issue of **Mammoth Western.** So now you can sit back and enjoy "Sheepherders War."

ALONG with the lead story for this month we are glad to welcome back Arnold Kohn with a swell cover. We predict you'll be seeing a lot of fine Kohn covers in the near future. So keep your eyes peeled!

ALEXANDER BLADE rode into the corral this issue with a mighty fine yarn, entitled, "Ride With Me to Kansas." Alex has done some of your favorite stories in past issues, as you well know, so we're kinda' sure you'll be well pleased with his yarn for this issue. It's all about a man who came on a long trip to Kansas, and when he got there, he found that riding into that state was more of a job than just spurrin' your horse over a boundary line. Just what happened to him, and why he was bound to get to Kansas, come hell or election, you'll find out when you read the story. So sit back in your saddle, light up a cheroot, and enjoy yourself. We think you will.

WE MENTIONED that H. B. Hickey's novel, "Saddles West," was now in pocketbook form. Hickey came in the other day to tell us that the book was selling faster than a Texas longhorn stampede. Well, we were right glad, and proud, to hear that, so nacherly, when Hickey handed us a new western story, we read it with great interest. You'll find it on page 144, called "Friend of the Breed." We think you'll read it with interest too. Start reading!

J. J. ALLERTON is a comparatively new writer to our pages. But if "Buster's Last Stand" is any sample of what Allerton can do, you'll be seeing his name quite frequently from now on. The story he offers this month is something of an off-trail western. Strictly speaking it is not a western in the true sense of the word. It is a story of Hollywood, the making of a western movie. But it has enough of that old flavor you like to make it packed full of reading enjoyment. And there is a neat twist in the yarn that is something new in the field. We think you'll be asking for more Allerton!

NOW that we've cleaned up this month's lineup, we can give you a sneak preview of what the next issue will feature. We've got a humdinger of a novel coming up next month, entitled, "Death Rides The Range." The author — in this case an authoress — is Mildred Gordon, who is a close friend of Mary Jane Ward, the lady who wrote that smash best-seller, "The Snake Pit." Well, Mildred has shown that she too can write one whale of a story, and we're going out on a limb by saying that we feel you'll get a big kick out of "Death Rides The Range."

IN CASE you're not familiar with the rest of the Ziff-Davis fiction group, you're missing some mighty fancy reading if you haven't picked up our two companion magazines, **Amazing Stories** and **Fantastic Adventures.** If you like a rip-snorting adventure story of other worlds in the Burroughs tradition, then mosey out to your newsstand and pick up the September **Amazing** or **Fantastic.** You'll find a terrific novel, "Titan's Daughter" in **Amazing Stories,** and another humdinger, "The Lavender Vine of Death" in **Fantastic Adventures.** Both of these magazines carry a star-studded corral full of writers each issue—the same writers very often who have become so popular with you in **Mammoth Western.** Boys like Paul W. Fairman, Chester S. Geier, H. B. Hickey, Don Wilcox, William P. McGivern, and many others. So take a tip from the bunkhouse — and we'll be seein' you . . . . . **Rap**

SACAJAWEA--"BIRD WOMAN"

By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT

ON MAY 14, 1804, Lewis and Clark started out from St. Louis to explore the great north west. They were accompanied by sixty men, some of Kentucky mountaineer type and some were French voyageurs. There was one negro, a servant to Captain Clark. They equipped themselves with food, clothing, weapons, medical supplies, scientific instruments, and interesting trinkets for the Indians.

It wasn't an easy trip up the Missouri with their clumsy boats. They buried one of their number at a point where Sioux City, Iowa, is situated. They camped for the winter at a village of Mandan Indians in North Dakota. They had time to bring their records up to date, and to learn a great deal from these Indians who had welcomed them. The Indians looked on the negro servant with awe and regarded him as a great man for they had never seen a negro before.

Lewis and Clark asked the Indians if they knew of anyone who might be able to help direct them over the route ahead, and they were told of Sacajawea. She was a young Shoshone woman, the wife of a French trader named Charbonneau. She had been stolen from her people when she was young girl by a raiding party of Blackfeet. She was taken down the Missouri and sold to one of the Mandans. It was there that Charbonneau found her and won her from the Indian in a gambling game. Sacajawea still knew the way back to her people on the western slopes of the Rockies, so Lewis and Clark asked Charbonneau if he and his wife would go with them on the rest of the westward journey. The Indian woman cried with joy at the thought of seeing her own people once more. So as soon as satisfactory terms could be arranged, Sacajawea, with her infant son on her back, was leading the explorers westward with the sureness of a homing pigeon. At first the men did not realize their good fortune in having the services of this Indian mother. She soon won their confidence as a fine guide, and by caring for the sick. She was able to find food for them and was able to deal with hostile Indians. On one occasion she saved the scientific equipment and records from going down in the Missouri river. Captain Clark was so pleased with her that he became her protector, even against her own husband who felt privileged to beat her whenever she displeased him.

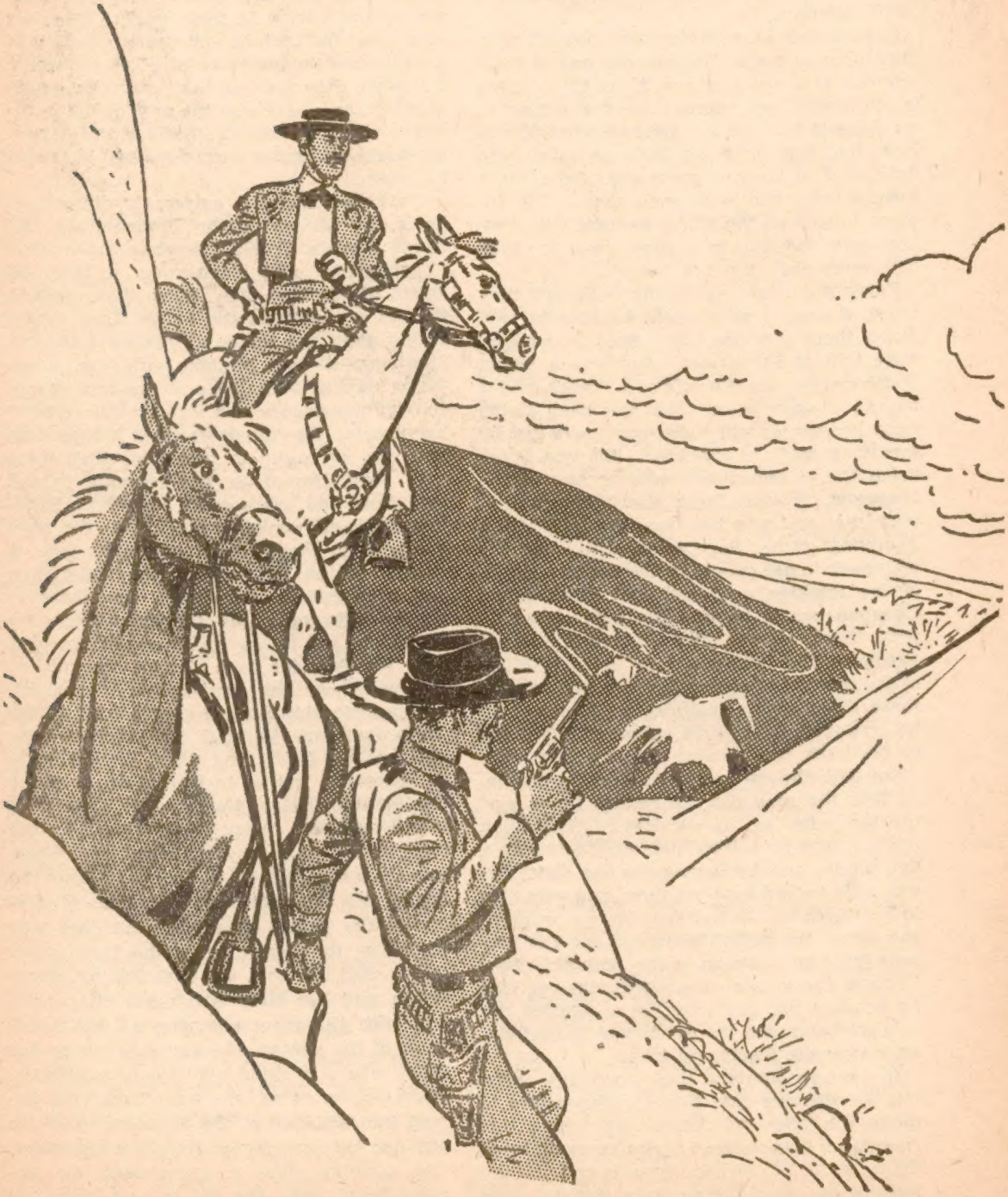
In western Montana they stopped to christen the streams that flow together there to make the Missouri. They went along this river till it branched off. Sacajawea directed them up the Beaverhead branch and into the land of her people. Days went by and none of the Shoshone or other tribes appeared and the men became dissatisfied. Lewis took several men and went on ahead to try to find some of the "Bird Woman's" homefolk. Clark and Charbonneau and the rest were to struggle on upstream and join Lewis in a few days. Lewis found some Shoshone women and they fearfully led the white men back to their camp. By the use of sign language they told the Indians that they had one of their tribe in their party. This fact interested the Indians and they consented to go with the palefaces to meet this woman. But when they reached the previously designated place, Clark and the rest of the party had not yet arrived. The Indians were growing more and more suspicious of Lewis and his men.

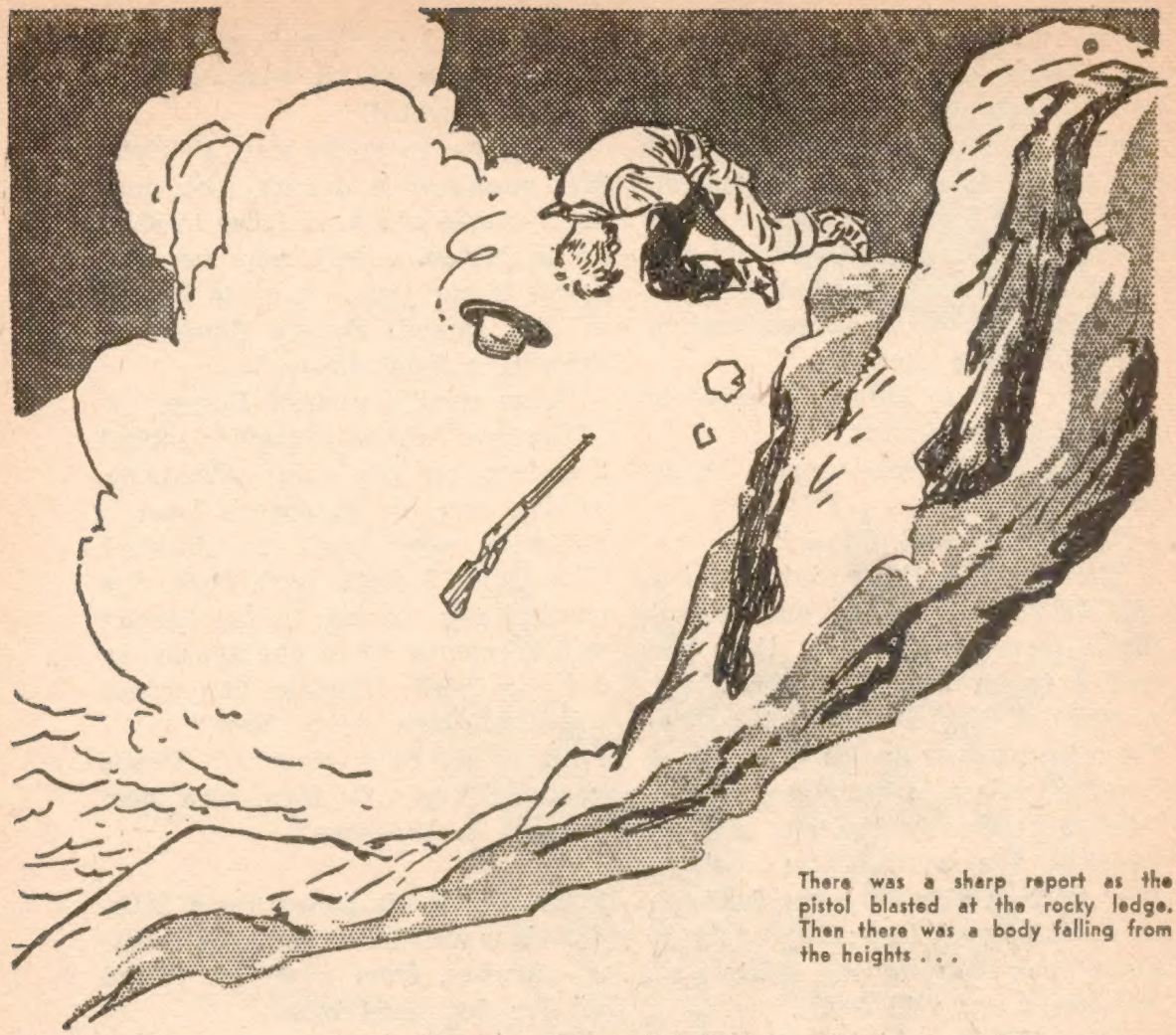
Clark had found it extremely difficult to bring the canoes up the Beavershead and Horse Prairie Creek. One morning he and Charbonneau and Sacajawea walked on ahead of his tired men. When they reached the top of a plateau and looked down into a valley, they saw the camp of Lewis and the Shoshones he had brought with him. Sacajawea danced with joy and ran into camp, sucking her fingers as a sign that these were her people. She inquired about her parents and was sorrowed to hear that they were both dead. Her sister had recently passed away and had left a baby boy which Sacajawea adopted as her own. But she did have one reunion that brought her much joy. A council of the Indians and the white men had been called. Sacajawea was there to act as interpreter. As the chief began to speak, she ran to him and threw her blanket over his shoulder as a sign of recognition. The chief was her own brother, Camehait. This relationship proved very helpful to the white explorers. Through her influence with her brother, Lewis and Clark were able to get Shoshone guides to lead them over the Continental Divide, through the Lolo Pass to Clearwater. When they reached that navigable stream they again put their boats into the water and made their way down the Snake and Columbia to the Pacific. Everyone in the party, except the one that was buried at the beginning of the journey, at last looked out onto the vast Pacific. Sacajawea and her baby had made the entire trip with the men, enduring all the hardships of the winter cold and existing on the scant rations of dried fish without complaint. When spring came, she went back with the men into the land of the Mandans, and she and her husband parted from the explorers. Our country owes a great debt for the courageous work she did to help open the trading routes to the great west.

SHEEPHERDERS WAR

BY EMILE EARLE

A cattleman expects to have rustlers move in on his rangeland — but sheepherders moving in means only one thing — range war!





There was a sharp report as the pistol blasted at the rocky ledge. Then there was a body falling from the heights . . .

THE sun, orange red through a haze of dust hung low in the west to cast long shadows behind the weathered buildings of the Bar D cattle spread, but its rays were still excessively warm. It was one of those unseasonable days not uncommon to the Texas Panhandle in early Spring. Hop Ling, the ranch cook and general factotum, had lugged his tub into the shade of the ranch house, where he was busily engaged in washing flannel shirts to the accompaniment of an interminable range ditty extolling the virtues of a certain Lulu gal.

Beside an open window of the house, Nick Doane, bachelor owner of the spread, now paying with a crippled leg for incautious riding across a prairie dog village, testily slammed the greasy cards with which he was cheating himself at Canfield down upon the table top and bawled.

"Hey, you ungodly heathen! Stop that dam' caterwaulin' or I'll come out there and Lulu you good and plenty. Quit it, d'you hear!"

Hop Ling's falsetto chant came to an abrupt stop. Doane reached for a home-made crutch and hobbled to the front door where he shaded his eyes with a hand to gaze out over the wide, undulating prairies. And at once the scowl was erased from his brow, for topping a rise a few hundred yards away were six or eight

horsemen—the crew was coming in from the range. The lonely rancher sighed contentedly, then let himself cautiously down upon the steps of the porch. As he did so an almond-eyed face slid around a corner of the house; the Chinaman eyed his employer warily for a moment, then his gaze followed to the approaching riders. Li Hung cackled:

"Boss no likee Lulu gal, mebbe so no catchee clean shirt."

Doane didn't look around; he directed placidly:

"You go to hell, Chink."

The horsemen turned into the corral, dismounted stiffly and unsaddled. Doane judged that they had had a tough day and were about played out. That is, all but two, who the moment their horses were turned loose mixed in a wrestling match. Almost paternally the old rancher watched the scuffle—you couldn't tire out that pair of young hellions, he reflected pridefully; they could do more work than any two oldsters on the ranch and still frolic.

As if the thought had carried by mental telepathy the two untangled and glanced toward their employer, seated upon the steps. One of them jerked his head meaningly, whereupon the other crawled through the bars of the corral gate and came toward Doane. The rancher wiped the smile from his face.

"'Lo, Boss," the slim cowboy greeted, "How's the game leg?"

"Oh, so-so." Doane's manner was wary. "What's on your mind, if anything, Blake?"

"Bob Rand and I thought we might ride over to Muleshoe tonight, Mr. Doane. We haven't been to town in a month of Sundays."

"Well, you know the way, don't you?"

The twinkle in Doane's eyes belied the gruffness of his voice and the cowboy chuckled.

"Yep, we know the way, all right. But somehow it doesn't look good for a couple of Bar D fellas to show up in Muleshoe with only two bits apiece in our jeans—it hurts the rep of the spread. So we figured on drawing a little dinero."

"How much?" queried Doane.

The lean flanked youngster rubbed the fuzz on his chin reflectively, looking over his employer's head.

"Le'me see, now," he drawled. "Bob and I both have four, five months pay coming to us, haven't we? Of course we're not figurin' on drawing it all: I reckon fifty bucks apiece will be a plenty, boss."

"It would be a plenty—" Doane countered dryly, "to leave with them tinhorns in Muleshoe."

HE felt in his pocket for a capacious wallet and extracted a bale of currency, from which he peeled off five dog-eared bills.

"Here's fifty between you, Blake, and that's sure as hell all you'll get from me to gamble away."

Blake took the five tens.

"That'll do us, suh," he said with solemn gravity, "Much obliged." Then he added. "We figured on getting only fifteen apiece out of you." He turned away, grinning wickedly.

"Hey!" Doane called out. The cowboy stopped and looked back. "You ride that Redskin stud of yours tonight, d'you hear? All he's doin' is to eat his head off on my oats and raise hell with my fillies. And you and Rand be back for breakfast; you're workin' tomorrow, sabe."

"We'll be here, suh," Terry Blake promised.

Terry Blake and Bob Rand were

sidekicks. Their fathers owned adjoining farms in the fertile black belt of Texas. The lads had grown up boon companions; they had attended the village school together and had later ridden side by side daily to high school in Fort Worth. Terry Blake had ever been the leader of the two, and when at twenty-one he had confided his intention to get a riding job out west in order to learn the cattle business from the ground up it was naturally assumed that Bob Rand would side him. The boys had promptly found jobs on the Bar D and had made good. They had been working for Doane for more than a year. To them, at the moment, life looked good.

The distance from the Bar D to the New Mexico state line at Farwell was some twenty-five miles in an air line, by by way of Muleshoe, something over half way, it was further. Blake and Rand pulled up in front of Muleshoe's principal saloon and gambling joint at nine o'clock: they alighted and tossed their bridle reins over a couple of iron spikes driven into a hitching rail. Terry Blake hitched up his leggings and chuckled:

"We're here, cowboy. One tall drink to take the alky out of our throats, then I'm going to take the shirt off of Jake Hall's back, the doggone crook. I'm out for gore tonight."

"You and me both," Bob Rand agreed heartily. Neither dreamed how prophetic was the idle boast.

TERRY Blake tugged a huge double case silver watch, popularly called a "turnip", from his pocket—it had ben a parting gift from his father.

"Say, fella," he said to Rand. "It's past midnight and you heard what the old man told us about working today. I'm cashing in."

Rand glanced at his meagre stack of chips and sighed ruefully.

"All right, Terry. But let's have one more jackpot—Jake still has his shirt. I'll get even or go broke, by gosh."

Blake winked at the gambler.

"Okey. We'll take you this time, Jake. It's your deal: make it a good one, for it's the last."

The other two men in the game, as much alike in their gambler's regalia —Prince Albert coat, soft bosom white shirt and flowing black tie—as a pair of crows, exchanged quick glances. Jake Hall riffled the cards then dealt them with an expert hand. Terry Blake skinned his off one at a time: he held a pair of queens, good openers, but with a red jack and not much else behind them. Yet a good bluff had raked down many a fat pot; too, he might be lucky in the draw.

"Ha!" he crowed. "She's open, fellas." He grinned at Rand and shoved a blue chip to the centre of the table. "I kinda like you, fella, and I hate to do this, honest I do. I'm advising you to stay out—I've got three cuties to go with; all I need is one more to start me a harem."

"Yeah?" Rand scoffed. "How many queens are there in this deck? I have a couple myself. Bluffing won't get you anywhere, only money talks this time. I'm raising you five bucks; put up or shut up."

The two gamblers, after a quick, enquiring look at Hall, threw in their hands, but the dealer stood the raise. So did Terry Blake, but with reluctance.

"How many?" Hall asked Blake.

"Better give me three," Blake said sadly, "One of my picture cards turned out wrong." He tossed his dis-

cards on the heap before him.

"Cards, Rand?" Jake Hall queried, carelessly gathering the scattered discards together.

Bob Rand's face was flushed, his manner one of illy suppressed eagerness. He held three aces, an almost certain winner unless Hall had been exceptionally lucky. Should Blake win the pot that was all right; Jake Hall was the one he was gunning for. Rand hesitated—to draw two cards would show up his threes, probably causing the gambler to drop out. He didn't want that: he said.

"I'll take one, Jake. Blake's out on a limb and my two pairs are plenty good to saw it off behind him. How many are you taking?"

"The ones I have will do," Hall said curtly. "It's your bet, Blake."

Blake stared at him, then turned an accusing eye on Bob Rand.

"Haven't you any sense at all, fella? Raising into a pat hand?" He tossed away his cards, exposing his openers. "You can have these hussies, they're Jezebels."

"How would I know Hall had a pat, you half-wit?" Rand retorted petulantly. "And, by gosh, I don't believe that he has—and I helped."

Rand counted his chips carefully, then shoved them out.

"It will cost you eight dollars more to see my cards, Jake. That taps me."

"Your credit is good—" the gambler said softly, "if you've got the guts to call a ten dollar raise."

Terry Blake's temper flared at the gambler's sneering tone. He swept his own chips before his side-kick.

"He doesn't need your credit, Hall; if he wants to call you there's the dough. Help yourself, Bob."

Rand was pale now and breathing hard. If he called Hall's raise he stood to lose more than twenty-five dollars on the hand; a lot of money for a forty-dollar-a-month cowhand. He had not helped his three aces; perhaps Hall had a straight or a flush, although he didn't think so. For a full minute he studied the gambler's unrevealing countenance, then he reached for Blake's stack of chips.

"You are called, Hall." He spread his cards out. "I have three aces."

"Sorry, Rand—that's not enough." The gambler exposed a straight headed by the jack of diamonds.

BOB Rand sank back with a deep-drawn sigh. Terry Blake leaned over the table, idly scanning the gambler's cards. A look of amazement swept over his face, to be quickly replaced by one of flashing anger, his right hand tugging at the Colts, which he wore only for ornament.

"Why, you lousy crook," he blazed, "you stole that jack of diamonds—**it is the one I just threw away.**"

The gambler's chair rasped back; a hand slid into his shirt bosom where, as every one knew, he carried a derringer; a weapon which he used with deadly effect at short range. Terry Blake, in sudden panic, squeezed his trigger; Jake Hall recoiled as if from a sudden blow, then toppled sideways to the floor. The cowboy stared with fascinated gaze at a slowly spreading crimson splotch on the gambler's white shirt front; for a moment he was as if turned to stone. Then one of the other gamblers yelled:

"Hell's fire! He killed Hall, murdered him. **String him up.**"

Terry Blake sprinted, Bob Rand at his elbow. At the screened front door Rand caught his friend's arm, halting him momentarily.

"Make for the border, Terry," he

muttered hoarsely. "When you're safe, head for Tucumcari—I'll have a letter there addressed to myself. Ask for it. Now ride, for God's sake, ride."

Bob Rand, a leveled Colts in his grip, flung about with his back to the door, to face the charging mob headed by Hall's gambler come-ons. His face was ashen, his hand none too steady, but his voice, a strained monotone, carried conviction by reason of its very quietness.

"I'll drop the first man who tries to go through this door; make no mistake about that, gentlemen."

The gamblers in front halted abruptly, pushing back against the men behind. But not for long. From without came a tattoo of swift hoofbeats. A man safely in the rear cried:

"Blake's gone! Rush that fella, you buckaroos; he's bluffin'." The crowd swayed, its leaders edged forward, impelled more by the pressure from behind than from inclination. Bob Rand's gun hand steadied.

"Hold it!" a voice edged with authority commanded sharply. Heads turned, eyes glanced over shoulders. A burly, middle-aged cowman, well known to most of those present, had mounted a chair. "Hold it, I say—he's not bluffing. Let me talk to him." He spoke to Rand over the heads of the crowd: "Listen, son. Don't be foolish. You've done your part and done it noble. A minute more and you'll kill someone, probably be killed yourself. Shuck a light now; nobody will try to stop you."

The hoofbeats were now but faintest echoes. No horse in the county could overtake the fleet Redskin short of the state line. Terry Blake was away.

"All right, suh," Rand said simply. "I'll go now—and thank you. I work for the Bar D if I'm wanted."

FARWELL and Texaco formed one continuous town which straddled the intangible Texas-New Mexico line. Together they counted a scant five hundred population. Blake's swift stallion flicked off the twelve miles from Muleshoe in less than eighty minutes; the cowboy had detected no signs of pursuit and gradually his panic subsided. At the edge of Farwell he drew rein, listening intently. A fence-post telephone line ran from Muleshoe to Farwell, but Blake hardly thought that anyone could be raised on it at this time of night. Both towns, as far as he might determine, were in utter darkness; not a sound was borne to him on the still night air. Yet he rode slowly and cautiously, the thick dust of the road muffling the sound of Redskin's hooves. He passed through Farwell without seeing a person and crossed into New Mexico. Texaco was equally quiet and the boy drew a long breath of relief. But he must not pause here, for a posse would surely be close upon his heels and would set the New Mexico officers on his trail at once.

Out of Texaco, he shook his mount into an easy lope, striking out at random across the trackless prairie. Shortly the bay evidenced signs of tiring for it had traveled thirty odd miles since sunset. Blake knew that Redskin must be rested against the more urgent need that might come: he slowed down, scanning the terrain about him with anxious eyes. Then, by the light of a waning moon, he saw a thick grove of trees and headed toward it.

He was well within the motte before he saw the house, squatting duskily in the shadows. The house

The gambler's hand slid swiftly toward his shirt bosom and the derringer that was hidden there. But Terry Blake drew in a blur of speed, his six-gun blazing

was dark and still, but somewhere a dog was barking: Blake drew rein, peering into the gloom. Then, at some distance behind the house, he made out a fence enclosing a barn, and he changed direction so as to circle about it.

The dog had ceased its barking. Perhaps, it occurred to Blake, he might get into the barn from the rear, where he could find shelter for himself and, probably, water and feed for his horse. He dismounted and approached the stable stealthily, leading Redskin. He had won almost to the building when a dark shape loomed before him, a sullen growl challenged—the dog, having fulfilled its duty by barking to announce the arrival of a stranger, was not silently on guard.

Terry Blake was not afraid of dogs, nor they of him. An infallible canine instinct informed them in-

stantly that he was not an enemy.

"Easy does it, boy," Blake said softly, snapping his fingers at the dog. "Let's you and I be friends, what say? Come on fella, come here."

The menacing growl quieted to a throaty murmur; Blake continued his cajoling, patiently waiting. Shortly the dog, a splendid collie, came up to him, its tail flagging a message of amity. Blake stooped to caress its shaggy head; to massage it gently behind the ears. The collie's tail wagged ecstatically.

"Good fella," Blake told it. "You're a jim-dandy, all right. Let's go."

WITH the intelligent animal at his heels he led his horse into the dark interior of the stable. There was no sound from the distant house. But he could hear other animals, doubtless horses, munching at fodder in the stalls. Feeling his way about he located an empty box-stall and led Redskin into it. There was a trough containing water, and in another some fodder — luck, Blake thought. He removed the saddle from Redskin's back, rubbed the jaded horse down with a wisp of hay hurriedly, then fastened the stall door. Then he spread his damp saddle blankets upon the dirt floor outside the stall and threw himself wearily down upon them. The collie sniffed at his recumbent figure, turned about a time or two, then curled up contentedly beside it. From the unhappy cowboy's lips welled a sound akin to a sob; an arm reached out to encircle this new found friend.

Chapter II

TERRY Blake did not fall asleep for an hour or more; he was revolving the phantasmagoric happenings of the day in his disordered mind. But after awhile he lost consciousness in a stupor of utter exhaustion. A gentle shaking aroused him.

"Go away, Bob," he muttered, turning over. "Let me alone; it's not time."

The shaking continued, not roughly, but persistent. Blake opened his eyes when a shaft of sunlight lanced into them, and instantly he was wide awake. Barely two feet from his own was the face of a woman. The troubled eyes which looked into his own were as blue as the prairie lupine; the hair, a disordered tumble, was almost the color of Redskins' satiny coat. The oval face, the cowboy noted absently, was starred with freckles. And now he saw that it was the face of a girl, yet in her teens.

Blake jerked to a sitting posture, full recollection of the tragic events of the preceding hours recurring in a bitter flood. But before he might speak the girl put a finger to her lips.

"S-s-sh!" she cautioned," Let me do the talking, please; we haven't any time to lose. There's a bunch of riders coming about a mile out on the Texaco road—for you, I reckon. They are riding fast and you must hide quickly. Get up and come with me."

"Yes, they are coming for me, ma'am—I am on the dodge. You see, I shot a man in Muleshoe last night, killed him. But you must not get yourself in trouble hiding me out, if that's what you mean. You don't know anything about me."

A sudden smile lighted the freckled face into something approaching beauty.

"Oh, yes, I do; I know a lot about you. No man that Shep will lie down

beside is very bad." She frowned, and added impatiently: "But we must stop talking; these men will be here in ten minutes."

"But how about my horse?" Blake questioned. "They will find it and know that it's mine. See." He opened the door to the stall in which he had placed Redskin; it was empty.

"I've taken care of your horse; I saddled it and hid it in the brush before I called you. Now come on fast before it is too late. I'll hide you where the sheriff can't find you even if he suspects that you stopped here. Come on."

"All right, ma'am," said Blake quietly. "You lead the way. I'm thanking you—and I won't forget, ever."

The girl shot him a quick glance and her face reddened. She conducted the cowboy to another box stall, in which an old raw-boned horse was standing in a doze. She pointed to the roomy manger.

"Lie down in there and I'll pile new hay on top of you. Old Toby maybe will snort a time or two, but then he'll set to eating like a house afire. The sheriff, if it's really him, will never think of anyone hiding there. He's a nit-wit, anyway."

Obediently Terry Blake laid himself flat upon his face in the deep hay rack, pillowing his head upon his arms. With a pitchfork the girl deftly speared a great bundle of hay, new-mown and fragrant, from the chute above and spread it over him. She got more and piled it high above the top. Old Toby did not even snort. He sniffed suspiciously once or twice, then yielded to the lure of the unwonted feast and began eating stolidly.

The girl gathered a handful of eggs from a nest in the stall, deposited them in her apron, then went calmly toward the house. Her voice rose blithely in song, as clear and sweet as the note of a meadow lark. She could hardly have reached the house when Blake heard male voices. They drew nearer, footsteps sounded on the hard packed floor of the barn; a man spoke:

"I guess your man did pass here last night, sheriff, because I heard Shep barkin'. But its a cinch that he didn't hang around long, for the barkin' stopped almost at once. That's why I didn't get out of bed. However, you can look around as much as you want to. I haven't been down this mornin', but Sally came for the eggs and if she had seen anyone she would have told me."

"You're damn right I'll look aroun', Spaulding," a gruff voice responded. "I wouldn't put it past any sheepman to hide out a murderer. Look in that closed stall, Jim. I can see into all the others from here."

BLAKE heard the stall door open, some one come in. He held his breath lest it betray him. Presumably Toby did not lift his busy nose from the manger, for Jim sang out:

"There ain't no man in here noways, sheriff, else this hawss wouldn't be feedin' as peaceful as it is. If Blake's here a-tall he's more'n likely in the loft."

"Climb up there and look around," the sheriff directed. "Here, take this pitchfork and probe around in the hay. But be careful; the fella's got a gun on him." He continued: "All these broncs yours, Spaulding?"

"They're supposed to be," Spaulding replied lazily. "At least, nobody else ever claimed 'em. Else"— he added maliciously, "You would have been down here like a bat out of hell,

especially if one of your cowmen bosses said he owned 'em."

"Damn it, Spaulding—" the sheriff retorted angrily. "You got no call to talk thataway; I haven't got any bosses."

Spaulding chortled. The deputy came down the ladder from the loft, his shoulders covered with hay.

"Nobody's up there, sheriff; that's a sure thing. I guess he must have gone on by."

"Yes, I suppose so," the officer conceded grumpily. "We'd better mosey along to'ard the bluffs, Jim. Spaulding, you let me know if you see anything of the fella, you hear."

Keith Spaulding's laugh was derisive.

"Sure, sheriff; you know you can count on me. But if I was you I wouldn't get careless-like in the bluffs—your man maybe has a Winchester and might take a pot shot at you."

The sheriff looked startled; he scratched his chin in sudden thought.

Terry Blake was thoroughly comfortable in his berth; the crisp plains air flowed into him plentifully through the slats of the manger. He felt oddly content, for he had found friends where he least expected them. He concluded that it would be wise to remain where he was for a time even after the officers had gone from the barn, and he had almost fallen asleep when a hand swept the straw aside and a voice bade him:

"Come on out, young fella; they're gone and Sally is scoutin' 'em."

The cowboy clambered out of the trough to confront a tall, lanky man clad in faded overalls. Blake said:

"You're Spaulding, I guess; I heard the sheriff call your name." He looked the other man squarely in the eye, "I heard your talk, suh, and I take it you are a sheepman and don't care much for cattlemen — I should tell you that I am one."

Spaulding's eyes twinkled as they fell to the cowboy's garb.

"I can read signs purty good, son," he drawled, "but right now you're just a young fella in a helluva lot of trouble, to me. The deputy told me that you killed a cheating card sharp in a gun fight, and that's like gettin' good news from home s'far as I am concerned. Come on up to the house and you can tell me about it over breakfast if you want to talk about it—you don't have to, you know."

Blake and the sheepman had finished eating and were engaged in earnest conversation when the girl came into the kitchen.

"They are out of sight, Pop," she announced. "I hardly think that the sheriff will be back soon." She glanced shyly at the cowboy. "I brought your horse in and gave it oats and water, Mister—"

Her father supplied the deficiency.

"Blake, Sally—Terry Blake, from the Bar D spread in Texas. Blake, this is my daughter, Sally." Then he continued. "We have been talkin' things over, Sally. I'm ridin' to Texaco this mornin' to see what I can pick up and I reckon' you had better fix up a sack of grub and take Blake to the cave; he'll be safe there if he is careful. There'll likely be more officers around for a day or two anyway, so Blake had best hole up until he figures out what he wants to do next."

Sally's agreement was prompt.

"Yes, that's best. But we will wait until the sheriff and his deputy heads back to town—we'll keep our eyes on them. Now I'll get my breakfast and

have everything ready for us to leave in about an hour, Mr. Blake." She thrust out a hand, manlike. "I am glad to know you, and you can count Pop and me as friends."

Terry Blake took the work-hardened little hand in his own.

"You have already proven that, Miss Spaulding. I was in luck to strike this place last night—in more ways than one."

A faint flush tinted the girl's freckled face at his unconsciously earnest tone and she withdrew her hand hastily. Blake turned to Spaulding. He felt in his pocket and produced a lone twenty dollar bill—his winnings in the gambling game had been left upon the table in Muleshoe.

"I don't know how to thank you for your kindness, Mister Spaulding.—I am grateful, suh. I want to pay for the grub you buy, of course, and I would like for you to get me a dozen boxes of cartridges for my gun, if you will; it's a Colts army model thirty-eight."

"It's all right about payin' for the grub, Blake, if it will make you feel better; it won't amount to much. But —" Spaulding's look was a dubious one now, "I don't get the idea of the wholesale ammunition, though it's none of my business.

Terry Blake's young eyes turned bleak.

"It's this way, Mr. Spaulding," he said. "I am outlawed now and on the dodge. I will be drifting west, where there is little law, which—" the boy's lips twisted dryly, "is all to the good for me, I guess. Anyway, out there it will be each man for himself, you know. I am not much of a gunman, even if I did kill another man. I intend to practice up on my shooting while I am hiding out."

Spaulding slowly shook his head, but said:

"All right, Blake, I'll bring 'em. I am saddlin' now. Sally will hole you up and I will probably ride out tonight. Good luck, boy."

The Bluffs of the Llano Estacado were a series of weird formations of chalky rock, rearing palisades like from an arid desert waste which extended far into the Panhandle country of Texas—the dreaded staked plains of legend. Here and there the bluffs were riven by tortuous canyons, and were honeycombed with caves which provided ideal hiding space for fugitives from justice, and were so used. Searching for a man in the desolate area was a thankless and perilous task. And so the Texaco sheriff and his deputy doubtless had concluded, for when Sally Spaulding and Blake halted in the shrub at the edge of the desert to reconnoitre they could discern the figures of two riders far to the north of them. Sally said gleefully:

"There is the sheriff, with his deputy, heading back toward Clovis — that's the county seat, you know. I'll bet they didn't even peep into the canyons. We can go on now."

An hour later the girl led the way into a narrow ravine which twisted its way into the bowels of the steeps; they rode on and shortly Sally turned her horse into a branching canyon, even more narrow than the other. A tiny stream of water trickled down its middle and it was lush with grass. A hundred yards and the ravine ended in a sheer cliff, the base of which for several feet up was covered densely with giant bracken.

"There is a spring up there," the girl explained, pointing. Pa says that

is why these ferns grow so rank."

She dismounted, Blake following her example. She made her way to one side of the ravine and parted the screen of bracken with her hands; a passage, more a rift in the cliff, was revealed, and a dimly defined trail wound upward at a steep angle. Forty feet or so higher the split closed and the cliff came together overhead, roofing the passageway and forming a tunnel-like cave some eight feet wide and thirty long. It was open at both ends.

Blake glanced curiously about; at one side of the cave was a canvas cot and two canvas camp stools. Opposite the cot was an upended pine box, on top of which was a lantern, its shade clean and bright. Inside the box were a few kitchen utensils, a smoke-blackened heap of stones, with a pile of dry mesquite branches beside it, evidenced where the cooking was done.

"All the comforts of home," commented the cowboy gravely.

Sally laughed her delight.

"Except a wash line, but you can always hang your clothes on a hickory limb outside. Pa found this cave and we fixed it up this way—we have had so much trouble with the cattlemen that Pa thought it might be a good idea to have it handy. He and I come out here now and then to spend the night. I love it . . and now I must leave it."

"Leave it?" Blake echoed. "You are going away?"

"Yes, right soon. Pa is selling out and wants to get away as soon as he can."

"Where will you go, Sally, if you don't mind telling me?"

"I don't know; somewhere further west where people don't hate sheep. If—" the girl's hand lifted in a little despondent gesture, "there is any such place." She grinned then and went on briskly. "But I'm talking about myself when I should be telling you the things you should know. Listen. The other end of this cave opens into a deep bowl; neither fire at night nor smoke in the day can be seen from any direction—you can safely have all the fire you need. There is a trail from the bowl to the top of the bluff, where the ground is level and thick with chaparral. From the rim of the bluff you can see for miles with little risk of being seen yourself. You can stake your horse where you left it in the gulch and there is grass and water, but if you should see anyone heading into the bluffs it would be better to lead it through the ferns into the passageway. However, unless a posse should happen in looking for someone in particularly, only cowboys hunting strays, or maybe a hunter, are likely to come. No one knows of this hideout; Pa found it himself. There's enough cooked food in the sack I brought to do you today and Pa will bring more tonight. That's about all and now I must go."

She offered her hand, frankly, and Blake held it tight.

"Will you be out again, Sally?"

Sally's candid blue eyes met Blake's levelly.

"Would you want me to come?"

"More than I have the right to tell you now," Blake said rather unsteadily. "What—how old are you, Sally?"

The girl's laughter rang out spontaneously; the walls of the cavern flung it back in bell-like cadence.

"The nerve of you, Terry Blake, to ask that. However, I am probably as ancient as you—almost twenty. Time to settle down."

"I am nearly four years your senior, youngster," grinned Blake, then in a musing tone of voice, "Maybe we both should be settling down."

The girl's laugh, this time, was a trifle forced.

"Are you proposing to me, Mr. Blake, or merely reflecting aloud?" Abruptly she jerked her hand from his clasp. "Come on down to get your truck, cowboy; I'm hitting the grit."

Chapter III

BLAKE had gone down into the canyon to dispose of Redskin for the night when he heard the thud of hooves. Probably Spaulding, yet he could not be sure; he took shelter in the bracken, his Colts ready. The rider came on, his horse loomed up darkly, a low whistle sounded. Blake stepped from his hiding place.

"Hello, Mr. Spaulding."

The sheepman reined in, chuckling.

"Taking no chances, eh? Well, that's all to the good, Blake."

Spaulding dismounted heavily, swinging a well-filled grain sack to the ground.

"I won't go up to the cave, Terry; I'm a little tired and I suppose Sally put you wise to the layout. I didn't hear much of anything in Texaco, nor in Farwell—I went across the line. Some were talkin' of the shootin' a bit, but there didn't appear to be any great amount of excitement over it. Nor were there any law officers about as far as I could see, but of course that don't mean much.

"You'll find everything you'll need for awhile in this sack, includin' your death dealin' ammunition. I likely won't be out again for several days, not until I figure it is safe for you to be on your way, because a deputy might be staked out spyin' on me—I'm a suspicious character, you know. But Sally will ride out maybe; she's plenty foxy and nobody will outsmart her. I'll have to go back now; I don't like to leave her alone for long."

"Of course not, suh," Blake was quick to concur, "And don't let her come out if there is any risk of her getting into trouble. You've both done enough for me already; more than I can ever repay."

"We don't expect pay, Blake," said Spaulding dryly, "except that you remember that sometimes sheepmen are as human as other folks. Well, I'll be gettin' along. Buenos noches."

After he had gone Terry Blake stood for long minutes in the same place, his lips drawn into bitter lines. The sound of the hooves died out in the distance; Blake hoisted the heavy sack to a shoulder and toiled up to the cave. When he had emptied it of its contents he laid down upon the cot without undressing, his eyes wide open, yet unseeing. A full moon rode over the bluffs, but its rays penetrated but dimly into the depths of the bowl: the night held the stillness of a tomb, almost a negation of sound. After a long time the cowboy fell asleep.

The sun was high over the bluffs when he awakened. He made his way down to his horse before preparing breakfast for himself; Redskin was grazing contentedly at the end of a long stake-rope. Blake curried his satiny coat with a handful of dried bracken, then filled his canteen with water and went back to the cave, built a fire and boiled coffee. After he had eaten he ripped the end from a cardboard container and wetted a stub of lead pencil with his tongue. The pencil poised uncertainly for a

moment, then the cowboy shrugged and with painstaking care sketched upon the cardboard a target — a black heart, life size. He found the trail in the bowl and mounted to the plateau.

It was as Sally had said—from his point of vantage he could view the flat prairies for miles about; they were now entirely void of human presence. After a while he set his target against a cactus stump and opened a box of cartridges. In the beginning he missed frequently, but before the box of shells was half emptied he was placing every other bullet in the centre of the heart. Content then, he stood for an hour or more practicing the draw, with first one hand then the other, awkwardly at first but with increasing speed and smoothness.

DAY after day he repeated the monotonous procedure; but first of all when atop the cliff he would stand for minutes gazing longingly toward the Spaulding ranch, only to meet with disappointment. Not a human came within the scope of his vision. The vast loneliness, his hopeless, self-accusing thoughts, ate like a canker at his heart, aging and embittering him. Sally did not come. He continued his pistol practice with dogged resolution, fast becoming expert.

On the sixth day he drearily mounted to the top of the bluff for his usual vigil; one glance, and his heart leapt in his bosom. For a rider was just entering the mouth of the outer canyon—Sally Spaulding, unmistakably. Blake hastened down into the cave, through the passage and to the stream, to find the girl waiting. She was straddling her horse as easily as any range rider, slim, erect and gallant.

Sally would not trust herself to dismount; she greeted Blake with a smile that held a measure of wistfulness.

"'Lo, cowboy; how's tricks? You are riding back with me today. Pa things it is safe for you to leave."

"All right, Sally." Blake spoke dispiritedly. "I have been lonely out here."

"I know, Terry," the girl's voice was very gentle. "I wanted to come, but it seemed better not to. Pa and I will be drifting on next week and then our trails must run far apart. You understand, don't you?"

"Which way do you go, Sally?"

"Not your way," Sally said quickly. "Down south somewhere, where you wouldn't be safe. Pa hired a man to drive the chuck wagon and he and I and Shep will herd the sheep. We'll graze along until Pa finds a likely place to settle, then he will try to buy another ranch. We may have luck—quien sabe?"

A despondent note was in the girl's voice again, then suddenly her impish grin reappeared.

"We're as cheerful as a couple of pall bearers, aren't we? Buck up, fella; get your pony and let's ride."

Keith Spaulding welcomed Blake with a handclasp that told more than words.

"Stay with us as long as you like, Terry," said he, "You are more'n welcome. But when you do want to go on I think it will be safe, provided you steer clear of Clovis. If it was me, I'd make straight for Tucumcari, swinging north from there and sorta workin' aroun' to'ard Las Vegas. That's cattle country."

"That is about what I have decided to do, Mr. Spaulding. I must go to Tucumcari anyway, for I'll doubtless

find letters there." Blake glanced about him dully. "And I think that I'll leave at once. I am all saddled up and ready and there isn't any use in staying on—to maybe get you in a jam at the last minute. I won't try to thank you for what you have done for me, suh: I couldn't find the right words. But if I ever have the chance to do anything in return—well, you know."

He took Spaulding's outstretched hand.

"Goodbye, suh."

Spaulding gave the boy's shoulder a comforting pat.

"Forget the thanks. Mebbeso we'll be meetin' up again some time—this world is not so big afta all. So long, Blake; be good to yourself."

Blake turned to Sally, standing as still and as rigid as a statuette. Her hands were knotted into tight little fists, yet she was smiling bravely.

"Goodbye, Sally."

Sally took one step foward, swayed toward the cowboy all unconsciously; then, neither knowing just how it came about, she was in his arms, her feet not touching the ground. Their lips met in a long first kiss; the girl's sunbrowned fingers stole up to lightly caress the cowboy's tawny hair. Blake let her slide gently, reluctantly, to the ground and Sally turned and ran into the house. Old Spaulding was staring intently at a cloudless sky.

"Kinda looks like rain, don't it, Blake?"

TERRY Blake called for mail at Tucumcari, giving the name as Bob Rand. After a sharp scrutiny the postmistress handed him two letters, one registered. Blake opened the unregistered one—it was from Rand, a mere pencilled scrawl.

> "Hall will live, Terry. Doctor Jordan said that your bullet probably do more good than harm—which seems like a waste of good lead. Will write again manana."

Terry Blake stood stilly, staring at the written words. Not once had it occurred to him that the gambler might not have been slain. After a long moment the full import of the news impacted on his consciousness, and with it came a flooding tide of relief: he was not a killer, not a fugitive, not an outcast! And, then, followed the flashing thought that never again, so long as he might live, would he draw a six-gun in anger save in defense. He opened the registered letter, it, too, was from Bob Rand and was obviously penned in a jubilant mood.

> "Come on home, you Deadshot Dick. Jake Hall is about as good as new. Nick Doane, crutch and all, drove into Muleshoe to see the deputy sheriff and put the fear of the Lord in him. The deputy says that crooked gambling will have to stop in Muleshoe, by gum! and for Hall to hurry and get well and pull his freight. Nick is sending your back pay and a little extra, which he says is a tinhorn scalp bonus. Your job is waiting for you, cowboy; come a running."

Twelve twenty dollar bills were enclosed. Blake, reading between the lines, sensed the unspoken delight of his side-kick and was moved. But queerly he felt no urge, no desire, to return to the Bar D, or to his Texas home. He would like to see Bob Rand, yes, and he was grateful to Nick Doane. But the lonely, brooding hours in the Llano Estacado had told on him immeasurably; he was

no longer the rollicking lad who had set out for a fling in Muleshoe, but a stern, saddened man, old beyond his years. He must be moving, on and on; nothing else would suffice. For a moment he dallied with the idea of returning to Spaulding's, to Sally, but he put the thought resolutely aside—he was but a roving, foot-loose cowhand.

He tarried in Tucumcari for two days in a state of indecision. Then he wrote to Bob Rand, made a few necessary purchases, and headed west, not knowing and little caring whither the trail he followed led.

Chapter IV

AFTER an hour the ranch houses squatting on the prairie about Tucumcari thinned, soon there was none at all to be seen. Nothing save a limitless expanse of grassy plains, broken in the far distance by a hazy outline, which might be, Blake thought, a fringe of trees along the banks of a meandering creek.

The day was warm beneath an incredibly blue sky which did not reveal a cloud as large as a man's hand. The tall grass was already growning beneath the hot sun, but there were acres and acres of wild flowers, so colorful as to seem unreal. Everywhere cattle grazed, long horned, scrawny beasts which at their first glimpse of the horseman were off like the wind. A faint breeze, barely enough to ripple the grass tops, blew in from the west, fresh and invigorating.

For a time the cowboy rode slowly, lounging hip-shot in the saddle in brooding withdrawal. Billows of gray, clinging dust stirred up by Redskin's shuffling hooves eddied about his head. Blake drew a bandana handkerchief from his pocket and tied it below his eyes to protect his mouth and nostrils from the irritating alkali: the mask seemed but to emphasize his remoteness.

Yet the newly acquired instinct of the gunman was awake: a prairie dog, reared upon its hind legs at the edge of its burrow, chattered noisily; his Colts, seemingly without volition upon the wearer's part, leapt into his hand and leveled. The prairie dog held its ground, barking defiance, and Blake with a shame-faced grin thrust the weapon back into its holster.

"You win, you pest. I guess I'm getting the heebie-jeebies."

Alert now, his gaze was attracted to a dense cloud of dust a mile away, which appeared to be bearing down toward him; he watched as it gradually approached. Shortly a band of shaggy wild mustangs loomed amid the dust, and some distance behind them four or five Indians, obviously in pursuit. The ponies passed Blake in full flight two hundred yards away; one of the Indians continued after them, but the others turned and raced toward the cowboy. Blake loosened his Colts in its holster and purposely rode to meet them, and as the four braves yanked their mounts to a sliding stop, he reined Redskin in. Roving bands of Indians were not uncommon about the Bar D; they were all alike, all confirmed horse thieves, Blake knew, and he swiftly sized these up. A buck, who wore the much-soiled headdress of a lesser chief, straddled a very old McClellan saddle tree, to which was strapped a rusted carbine. The others rode bareback, and each carried over his shoulder a bow and a quiver of arrows, apparently his only weapon. All were stripped to the waist, with dirty jean trousers below. Mes-

calero Apaches, Blake thought, who were known to be off their reservation. However, the paint daubs on their faces indicated that this was a hunting party, and not on a raid.

"How, amigos," Blake greeted them amiably, one hand lifted, palm outward.

None of the Indians replied. The chief let his gaze rove over the cowboy from head to foot, missing nothing. Then he inspected Redskin with even more care, and his reddened eyes grew avid.

Finally he grunted, "How." And added: "Heap fine caballo; me want 'um. You sell'um? Mebbeso swap?"

Blake smiled grimly; the same old approach, he thought. His hand dropped to the butt of his weapon suggestively as he spoke.

"Oh, you want 'um, do you? Well, this caballo is not for sale or trade, chief. He pointed to the fast receding bunch of broom-tails: "Those are the only ponies you'll get; if you don't hustle you won't get them. Now, vamoose, pronto!"

The Indian buck scowled, then glanced sheepishly at his followers. They returned his look stolidly, yet with a glimmer of amusement in their eyes. The chief grunted something, waved a hand, and all four wheeled and sped away on the chase.

Blake laughed aloud. The trivial incident had lifted him from his slough of despondency and had imbued him anew with self confidence. He was young and in perfect health, he reflected; there was no longer a price upon his head and the fields were green ahead. He resumed his journey almost jauntily.

AT nightfall he made dry-camp in a thicket of mesquite, but was riding again at sun-up. Shortly he espied a ranch and rode toward it: it proved to be a small, but well ordered spread, evidently a prosperous one. A round-faced man with friendly blue eyes was standing upon the gallery of the main building.

"Light, stranger," he hailed cordially, "you've arrived."

"Sounds good," Blake grinned. "I might stay quite a while if you can use a fair-to-middling cowpoke. My name is Blake."

The stout rancher eyed Blake shrewdly, taking in the horse he rode and its saddle rig.

"Texas man, eh? Who you been ridin' for, Blake?"

"Nick Doane, near Muleshoe; maybe you've heard of his ranch, the Bar D."

"Sure. I know Doane. My name is Leslie and this is my spread. Yes, I can use you; I don't know for just how long, but a couple of months anyway. Put your horse in the stable and shuck him a li'l' corn; that bronc is worth feeding—and you'll have to watch it durn close or you won't have it long out here."

Leslie was good natured and easy going, yet a capable cattleman. Blake found the men of the crew, eight in number, friendly and companionable. He liked them. He fell readily into the work of the spread and much of his restlessness left him, but the curious sense of frustration, the conflict within himself which urged him on to some unfulfilled purpose, remained. What that purpose was he did not know himself, yet he felt it. Over and over his thoughts went back to Sally; try as he would, he could not banish them.

He had been at work for Leslie three weeks when after supper one night the rancher came into the bunkhouse where some of the hands were

playing cards. His face was stern now, and the usual lines of good humor about his eyes were not there. He addressed his foreman shortly.

"Frank, there's a squarehead squatted in the old shack on Chocolate creek. He's got a flock of woolies; not many, but maybe a hundred head. Go over the first thing tomorrow and haze him out. No rough stuff, if you can help it. Just tell him there's better sheep range further west and to drift on. **And see that he does it.** Take Blake with you."

Frank nodded casually and went on with his game. Terry Blake gave a short, harsh laugh and the players turned their heads to eye him queerly. Shortly Blake crawled into his bunk, but not to sleep.

He was pondering bitterly the instructions given Frank—see that he **drifts on.** Always the sheeper drifts on, Blake reflected moodily. By this time, no doubt, Spaulding was drifting on . . . and Sally . . . and would drift on again and again as long as they ran sheep. In the young cowboy's hot heart a passionate resentment of a system which fostered ha-

Blake unlimbered his colt in its holster and reined his pony to a halt before the armed Indians . . .

tred and fathered persecution welled fiercely. The resolve which had been sub-consciously forming in his mind took concrete shape, still nebulous as to definition, but clear and inflexible as to intent. When he had breakfasted the next morning he asked for his time without proffering an explanation. It was handed to him without question. Such was the way of the roving cowboy; he came when he willed, went when he willed, rolling like a tumble weed before the wind. And hardy was the man who challenged this right.

BLAKE rode away with a careless wave of a hand. It was three o'clock that afternoon when he came to Cimarron, a tiny town nestling in a valley girdled by rugged, frowning hills. The cowboy was tired and dust covered. He saw a cubbyhole of a barber shop in a corner of a saloon; it looked inviting and after he had stabled Redskin in a livery barn a block away he walked back and into it. There was no one in the shop, so he passed through a door at its end which led to the saloon. A red faced fat man, wearing a greasy blue apron, was behind the bar; otherwise the saloon was empty. The bartender smiled a welcome, at the same time reaching for a bottle of rye.

"Uh-huh—" Blake grinned, "you guessed it first time. But I never did like to drink alone with a first class thirst like the one I have now. Just pour yourself one, pardner."

The bartender poured two drinks.

"Here's how," Blake offered.

The fiery liquor slid down his throat.

"Where's the barber?" he enquired.

"Want a goin' over, huh?" The bartender inspected the other's face critically. "Well, you can sure do with one. Go right in and set down in the chair and the barber will be with you pronto. His name is O'Donnel, and he's a helluva good fella when you get to know him. Wait a minute; before you go have a snort on the house."

"I'll do that later," Blake grinned. "The other one is still sizzling."

Blake went into the barber shop and climbed into the one motheaten chair. Presently, the barkeep came in briskly, drying his hands upon his apron, which he had reversed. It was white now and fairly clean. Blake chuckled:

"Oh, I see—you dope 'em, then shave 'em."

"I have to. Thataway I get back on the barberin' part of what I lose on the booze. What'll you have, pard?"

"The works — haircut, shave, shampoo and anything else you keep in stock. I'm coddling myself."

The barber sighed.

"Chris! I'm glad to see a man with money."

He reached for the clippers. Blake enquired:

"Any chance for a cow punching job about here? I could use one."

O'Donnel thought this over.

"No, I couldn't rightly say that there is. Al Stringer lives here; that's his house up on the hill. But his cattle ranch is over at Stringerville, on the Santa Fe; you musta come very close to it. He has a big crew there and stays on the ranch most of the time. This is more of a coal mining district.

His going-over finished, Blake had the promsied drink on the house, then repaired to the one hotel in town. He learned that Stringer was at his ranch. The cowboy stayed around Cimarron for a week or more, at loose ends. More to seek forgetfullness than from desire he drank a lot, and he gambled nightly in the saloon, with little luck.

Awakening one morning with a hangover, he counted the money in his poke—he had gambled away more than half of his hoard, and had little more than a hundred dollars left. The discovery brought him up with a jerk. On sudden impulse he settled his hotel bill, saddled Redskin, and rode to the saloon. The genial O'Donnel was standing upon the sidewalk, his apron rolled up about his bulging middle. He eyed Blake's saddle roll with speculative interest.

"Don't tell me you're pullin' up your stakes?"

"Yes, I am, O'Donnel. I've loafed longer than I can afford. I came by to get you to tell me how to get to Stringer's ranch."

O'Donnel took his hands out of his pants pockets.

"Sure, I will. And even though it costs me a good customer, I'm dam' glad you're leavin', Blake. You're too young, and too square a galoot, to hang aroun' a dump like this gamblin' and guzzlin'. Climb down and come in, and while we're havin' a shot on the house I'll show you how to get to Stringers."

BLAKE alit and followed O'-Donnel into the barroom. Pouring a couple of drinks, the bartender drew a map with a whiskey-wetted finger on the bar top.

"You go east down the valley for fourteen, fifteen miles until you come to the Santa Fe tracks. You know the road that far, I take it, for you had to come in that way. Then, when you strike the rails turn south for another twelve, fourteen miles and you'll come to a railroad station; that's Stringerville. The ranch is about five miles east of there; anybody will tell you how to reach it. If you don't have any luck at Stringer's, there's a whalin' big spread straight ahead of you at Joneta just inside the Lincoln county line. It b'longs to Pat O'-Hearn and he's a good man to work for; I usta ride for him myself. You're almost sure to land a job there, because Pat takes 'em all on."

Blake thanked him. O'Donnel accompanied him to the sidewalk and squinted up at the skies. They were overcast with leaden clouds, speeding in curling masses before a stiff north wind from over the Rockies. But an ominous calm prevailed in the valley. From beyond the mountains came the sullen mutter of thunder.

"Shucks; you can't go now," O'-Donnel exclaimed. We are in for a norther and a whale of a rain; more'n likely it will turn into sleet. Better put your horse up and stay over a day."

Blake shook his head. His mood just then was in accord with the elements; he felt, somehow, that he would like nothing better than to buck a storm. He mounted Redskin and spurred away.

Chapter V

BLAKE was not half way to the railroad when the storm broke in all its fury. An icy gale swept down from the Rockies, driving before it sheets of rain which but for the slicker he had donned would have drenched the cowboy to the skin. Blake pulled his hat down over his eyes and rode sturdily on. Before he reached the Santa Fe tracks the rain had become, as O'Donnel had predicted, a stinging, needle-like sleet, and the cowboy's fingers grew so numb that he could barely hold the reins. But when he reached the railroad and turned south with the wind at his back he felt less discomfort. Yet with each successive blast the air grew colder.

An hour after he had changed his course he saw a small flock of sheep beside the road, huddled into a tight mass. Many of them had already lain down. A Mexican lad of twelve or fourteen, with the assistance of a yelping, snarling dog, was vainly striving to get them in motion again; otherwise many of the ewes would freeze to death where they lay. Blake uncoiled a length of his lariat. Doubling it, he rode among the sheep, flogging the stupefied animals and yelling at them, devoting his attention mainly to the few stubborn old rams. After a time one of the rams broke away, another and still another. The ewes got to their feet and followed blindly, bleating a mournful protest. The Mexican lad flashed his teeth in a grateful grin of acknowledgement; the cowboy heard his "gracias senor" above the whistling wind.

The flock headed south, the way Blake was going. He trailed along behind it to speed the straggling

sheep; already his dark humor was lifting from him. Shortly they met a squad of cowboys riding north, hardily breasting the storm. Some of the men did not lift their eyes, but one, evidently the leader, glanced at the sheep, then looked Blake over narrowly, venom in his gaze. Blake's twisted lips snarled a silent challenge in return.

Hardly had the cowboys passed when another horseman hove into sight, riding all alone. Blake saw that he was an aged Mexican, so frail that the cowboy marvelled at his fortitude; his lips were blue from the cold. He halted beside the lad; the latter spoke a few swift words, nodding toward the cowboy behind. The old man ranged up beside Blake.

"I'm thank you ver' much, senor." his English was adequate. "Mio muchacho tell me w'at you do. But for you theem sheep would mos' surely have died. Eet ees not so far to my house now, an' then they weel be all right. Would you, senor, be so kin' as to use my poor shelter for the night?"

"I was glad to help the boy, friend," Blake told him, then added enigmatically: "It is going to be a big part of my job helping sheepmen from now on. How far is it to Stringerville, compadre?"

"T'ree, four mile onlee. But thees col' is ver' bad, senor."

The cowboy had an idea what the sheepherder's hospitality, at its best, must be. He said:

"I'm pretty well bundled up, old man. Thanks for the invite, but if it's only that far I guess I'll go on to Stringervile. Then I can sleep as late as I like tomorrow. Adios."

The ancient appeared relieved; he responded with a wave of a trembling hand. The boy showed his teeth in another smile as his benefactor passed by. Blake reached Stringerville stiff from the cold, the blood seeming like ice in his veins. The hotel was not bad and rarely in his life had he crawled beneath warm blankets with greater alacrity.

THE next morning dawned bright and clear; the storm had passed off as suddenly as it had come. The day was mild, almost balmy: the grass was already greening; the prairies were bright and shining, like the freshly washed face of a school boy. Blake slept late, and it was near noon-time when he had eaten and started on his way. He identified the Stringer ranch at a glance when he came to it; it was indeed an important layout, one that must employ a host of riders. The cowboy hoped that he might land a job. But he was doomed to disappointment. When he asked for the foreman a square-jawed man of middle age with a cruel mouth came out of the house. He wore a six-gun at his hip, unusual when about the home place. Blake did not recall having ever seen him before, but the foreman's memory was better. His response to the cowboy's enquiry about a job was a curt question:

"Didn't I see you yesterday helpin' a Mex drive a flock of sheep?"

This, then, must be one of the group of men he had passed in the storm, Blake inferred, sensing the import of the interrogatory. He answered tranquilly, though his blood was running hot.

"You probably did, suh. I was helping a poor Mexican kid get his sheep started so that they wouldn't freeze to death on him. I hadn't ever seen the boy before and I trailed along behind the flock for a ways.

What about it?"

The Stringer foreman turned away, his countenance purpling with his effort at self-restraint.

"Nothing about it; we can't use you here, that's all."

"You— can go— straight to hell, suh." said Blake.

The words were clipped, deliberately spaced, and as they were intended, an unmistakable challenge. Terry Blake was in a dangerous mood. The other man wheeled in his tracks, a hand flashing to his holster.

"You— you . . ."

But the gun did not come out. Something in the stony eyes which looked down into his own; the cool, grim air of readiness about the stranger, sounded a quick warning. The foreman bit off the fighting epithet before it had left his lips, stared for a moment, then turned and strode toward the house. Terry Blake raked Redskin savagely with his spurs; at the unwonted punishment the bay lunged violently and was off at top speed. The cowboy was on his way to Pat O'Hearn's spread.

At nightfall he stopped on the banks of a running stream, tethering Redskin close beside his fire, for O'Donnel had informed him that rumors of roving horse theives were rife in Cimarron. The clean-limbed, blooded bay would catch the eye of any horseman and Blake was taking no chance. He had eaten and was resting beside the fire when Redsin's head lifted suddenly, his ears pricking forward. Instantly the cowboy was alert; he had heard no sound, but he knew the meaning of the bay's unrest. He reached for his gun belt and slipped into the bushes, buckling the weapon about his waist. The sound of slowly moving animals in the brush now came to him; they grew louder, then two men rode into the clearing about the fire. Blake parted the brush for a look-see.

One of the riders was a lantern-jawed white man, the other a lithe young Mexican. Both men had sinister countenances, roving, furtive eyes; each wore a low-slung pistol. Redskin snorted, tugging back on his halter, thus attracting the attention of the newcomers. They sized up the beautiful horse with critical gaze, and exchanged meaningful glances. The white man sang out:

"Hello-o! Anybody at home?"

BLAKE did not answer the hail; he would wait awhile and the suspicious seeming visitors of the night might talk, perhaps revealing their purpose. They did talk, in little more than whispers, yet which carried distinctly to the cowboy crouched not ten feet away. Said the white man:

"He must be close aroun'; the fire's fresh built."

"Mos' likely heem gone to a pool for a sweem, Ransom," the Mexican suggested.

"That's maybe it, Juan. You ride down the creek a piece and locate him. We've gotta have that bronc."

The Mexican rode down the creek for a couple of hundred yards, then turned about and came back, hugging the bank of the stream. He found Blake seated on the brink of a water hole, tugging on his boots.

"Ola, companero " the Mexican greeted, "Thees your camp?"

"Uh-huh," said the cowboy. "I heard you holler, but I was in the water. I'm just going up; get down and come along."

The Mexican dismounted, leading his horse. The lantern-jawed white man hailed Blake jovially, glancing

keenly at his dampened hair.

" 'Lo, pardner. We thought maybe you had gone and drownded yerself; I was jus' figgerin' on stealin' you outa house an' home."

"Did you say **horse** and home?" Blake smiled thinly.

The other's brows lowered, but he affected to take it as a joke.

"Ha! Ha!" he chortled. " 'At's a good one—**hawss** an' home! At that, I wouldn't min' ownin' that plug of your'n. Want to sell him?"

"Not tonight," Blake answered shortly. "Have you fellas had your supper? Because if you haven't I have plenty of sowbelly and coffee; help yourselves."

"Oh, no, thankin' you jus' the same," the white man said. "We done et before we left the Scissors—that's Pat O'Hearn's outfit, where we work. My name's Ransom, and I'm one of Hearn's road bosses. This fella is Juan Menendez. You a stranger aroun' here?"

"A sort of one." Blake refrained from mentioning his name. "I came from Cimarron. Is O'Hearn taking on any new hands? I'm riding the chuck line."

Ranson s c r a t c h e d his chin thoughtfully; he looked at Blake's holster.

"No-o, I wouldn't say that there's much chance now; it's an off time and we're full up. But if you're good with that six-gun I know where you can get a job at high pay."

"What has the six-gun got to do with it?" Blake queried idly.

Ransom displayed his yellowed teeth in a leer.

"There's a sheep war comin' up at Lincoln, 'bout forty miles south of here. You go see John Compton, if you get that far. He'll fix you up."

"I'm afraid I couldn't qualify." The cowboy's voice was lazy. "I'm not much shakes with a short-gun. Besides I'm not hunting anybody's sheep war."

Ransom stood up with an exaggerated yawn.

"Well, I was only tellin' you. I reckon we'll ramble along, pardner."

He shot a quick, meaning glance at the Mexican; Juan slunk off to one side, catlike in his movements. Terry Blake knew that his first real test was at hand. Yet he was at ease, confident, his nerve and muscles relaxed. Ransom thrust his long jaw forward, staring into the darkness behind the cowboy's back.

"Jerusalem! What's that?"

Terry Blake pretended to turn about, then ducked aside, a hand slapping for his Colt. Ransom's gun was out and lifting, but an instant too late. The cowboy's weapon flamed; the lantern-jawed mna's weapon spun from his hand into the brush. With barely a pause Blake's Colt swept on . . . Juan fired in haste, missing by a foot. Blake, camly taking aim, shattered the Mexican's gun-hand with a bullet; Juan staggered back, squealing like a stuck pig. numbed fingers of one hand with the

RANSOM was s t a r i n g with bulging eyes, massaging the other.

"You low-down sneak," he complained bitterly. "You tol' me that you wasn't no gun-man."

"I'm not," Blake returned morosely. "But it looks like everyone I meet up with is damn well trying to make me over into one. Help your greasy friend get on his horse—he's not hurt a hell of a lot; a finger or two smashed, that's all—then both of you shuck a light. Make it snappy, Ransom. And I wouldn't advise you to

come back too soon. Now get out!

The white man aided his Mexican accomplice into the saddle; Juan was almost in tears, as much because he was leaving the coveted prize behind as from his hurts. The two rode off, Ransom casting a last longing glance toward the bush which concealed his pistol. The cowboy listened until the hoof beats grew faint: he stooped for Ransom's six-gun and balanced it in his grip; it was also a 38, almost matching his own. Blake's lips curled in an ugly sneer as he thrust the weapon under his belt. A two-gun man now! Twenty minutes later he struck camp and rode south beneath a galaxy of twinkling stars — Lincoln bound.

Chapter VI

THERE is a mysterious element in the alchemy of life which produces a result that we mortals, in our entire lack of understanding, elect to term coincidence.

Hardly was Terry Blake on his way to Tucumcari when the man who had contracted to buy Spaulding's ranch showed up, days sooner than expected. He produced the purchase money and remained to take possession. Keith Spaulding was now anxious to get away, and his arrangements were all complete save the loading of the meagre house furnishings which he proposed to take with them to their new abode, if one was found. He mounted a horse and rode off, leading another. Within an hour he was back with a Mexican youth whom he had engaged to drive the wagon team and to help stand watch over the flock at night. Spaulding had disposed of the most of his sheep, keeping only about five hundred of the hardier and better animals should he settle upon a permanent location he would buy more.

Sally and the Mexican helping, he stowed his possessions into a prairie schooner, which would be drawn by a span of sturdy mules. At nightfall the work was completed and everything in readiness. The sheep had been penned in the corral. However, Spaulding thought it better to delay their start until the next morning, so they spent the last night in the old place. Sally cried a little on her pillow.

On the same day, and at about the hour, that Terry Blake rode out of Tucumcari, bound for nowhere, the Spauldings set out upon their trek, equally without a fixed destination. At the urge of rancher and Sally, backed up by the joyous Shep, the sheep moved off at a brisk shuffle. The huge, canvas topped wagon, in which Sally would sleep at night, followed under the capable guidance of the Mexican youth. It was a promising start, and by degrees Sally's fit of depression fell from her. She was attired in full cowboy rig, her auburn hair tucked tightly beneath a wide brimmed Stetson, and at a distance no one would have taken her for other than a slender, graceful boy in chaps. Her spirits were mounting fast. A big, home-loving ram broke away from the flock and turned back in a lumbering gallop. Instantly Sally was after it.

"Y-e-e-a-a-h!" Her long-drawn cry was like a bugle call. "Get back there, darn you; we're going the other way."

It was their second day out and they had made the welcome noontime stop to prepare and eat their dinner when a stranger rode up. He was of small stature and evidently on the shady side of fifty. His hair,

such as he had, was sun bleached and his furrowed face was the color, and the texture, of leather long exposed to the weather; his chin was receding and weak, and his faded eyes held the cowed, appealing look of a vagrant cur. He straddled a gaunt gray nag, the ribs of which might all be counted, and whose mane and tail were matted with cockle-burs. The horse halted of its own accord, and the newcomer looked down at Spaulding and Sally, who were lolling about a blanket spread upon the grass. The stranger did not speak, but at the sight of the viands he unconsciously licked his lips. Spaulding grinned.

"What say you hop off and eat with us, pardner?" he invited. "We've got more than enough, and you'd be mighty welcome."

The man said only 'thankee' and got wearily down. He squatted beside Spaulding and helped himself, eating ravenously. When there was nothing more in sight, he wiped his greasy mouth upon a sleeve and looked at Sally, and there was a distinctly winning quality in his whimsical smile.

"That was plum' good, ma'am. I won't say I didn't have somethin' like it in min' when I rid up; I heard yer sheep blattin' an' turned to'ard ye. I've been in the sheep business myself goin' on twenty years— 'til las' week. They call me Sheepish Southwell back ter home. Don't know but 'tain't as good a name as any."

"Where are you bound for now, old timer?" asked Spaulding.

"Texas—if I can make it." Southwell said succinctly.

"And where did you run sheep? Not in Texas, I reckon?"

"Nope; had 'em around' Lincoln, out west o' here. Sol' 'em las' week an' lit out fer Amarillo, Potter county, state o' Texas. An' I done got this far anyhow, thank goodness."

Spaulding put a leading question.

"You didn't like Lincoln as a sheep country?"

"I liked it too dum good, else I'd been a r'arin' back in a rockin' chair in Amarillo long ago."

"Why did you leave, then?" Spaulding was purposely insistent.

"You know dum well why I lef'," old Southwell said shrewdly, "becuz' you're leavin' somewheres right now. Cowmen, that's why. They harried me, an' all t'uther sheepers, every dum minit, it looked like. Soon's I got a right good flock together I'd go out huntin' 'em, only to fin' 'em turned to mutton at the foot of a cliff. Well, mebbe the drated woolies jus' jumped off theyselves for pure dum cussedness. I dunno. But I—"

THE old man broke off and squirmed, then twisted an arm about to scratch his back vigorously.

"Dum Arkansaw travelers," he explained briefly, and resumed: "But at that, I coulda stuck it out and woulda, only when I heard tell that the Mex sheepers, egged on by some fool white men who've brung sheep in lately, was bandin' together to put up a fight agin the cattlemen, I got an idear I'd be better off in Texas— I ain't no fightin' man an' never will be. I wouldn't be surprised if the sheepers come out on top this time, they're gettin' so dum fired up. But 'twouldn't do me no good; I'd be dead an' buried. I ain't got no luck. So I sol' my sheep to Don Guadalupe de Montoya an' vamoosed."

Keith Spaulding's eyes were narrowed now and burning with desire. He strove to make his voice sound casual.

"Did you own your own place there, Southwell?"

"Yessir-ee. I own it yet." Southwell said this with pride. I got twelve acres, mo' or less. An' a fair-to-middlin' shack, three rooms. An' a well, an' a rock corral, an' a hoss pasture. They set atop a hill whar I could watch my sheep graze fer nigh onto five mile without leavin' the house—on free range. When I wanted 'em all I had to do was to go git 'em."

"Why didn't you sell the place if you're not goin' back?"

"Who'd buy it?" Southwell wanted to know. " 'Tain't worth a whoop in Tophet fer anything but sheep."

Keith Spaulding got down to business.

"I'm in sheep, and I might buy it if your price ain't too high."

Southwell puckered his lips in a whistle.

"Afta what I jus' tol' you?"

"Because of it," Spaulding snapped.

The old man spread his hands apart in a gesture that patently disclaimed further responsibility for what might happen. He shrugged his thin shoulders.

"I've alluz heard tell—" said he, "that thar ain't no fool like a old un. Howsoever, 'tain't my business to set myself up as yer gardeen. I signed my papers over to Don Guadalupe; he's a ol' time sheeper an' as square as they come. I tol' him to sell the place, ef he could, for six hundred dollars—gol', not 'dobe, nin' ye. Montoya sed 'twasn't worth mo' than ha'f of that. I'll split the difference wid ye. Ye pay me fo' fifty cash on the dot an' I'll give ye a receipt an' a letter to Montoya an' he'll fix up the title for ye."

Southwell took his battered old hat off and removed a batch of papers from its crown, finally selecting one.

"Here, read this; it's a writin' from Montoya sayin' as I own the twelve acres, an' what improvements thar's on it. I didn't want the dum letter, but Montoya kinda pushed it on me, an' now, b'gosh, it'll come in handy to show ye I ain't no liar."

Keith Spaulding read the document with scrupulous care, then he reached in his hip pocket for his wallet and began counting out money.

"You've sold your place, Southwell," he said quietly. "Here's the four fifty and I'll throw in a decent horse. There's two lead ones tied behind the wagon; saddle either one you want, and turn that crowbait of yours out to die—he'll probably get fat on this grass." The sheepman looked at his daughter. "Sally girl, we've bought somethin' "

Sally Spaulding had heard it all, with vague, uneasy foreboding. Yet her lips were now parted in an eager, breathless expression; her eyes were radiantly aglow. Adventure was calling aloud.

"Be sure to have him tell you the shortest way there, Pa," she enjoined. "I'll have the boy hitch up the mules in three shakes of a shep's tail."

AN early Spring had brought the wild flowers in rank, gorgeous profusion and as far as vision extended, the undulating prairies glowed with color, as if overlaid with a vivid oriental rug; the blue of lupin, red and purple of verbena, pink and white of primroses, yellow of buttercup, multi colored poppies, heliotrope, brodiaea and the flaming plume of desert candles sparked be-

neath the rays of the sun like myriads of irridescent jewels.

Urged by the tireless shepherd dog, who seemed to sense that they were now really going somewhere, the flock hustled along at an ambling trot. Spaulding halted the drive but for an hour at noon and an hour before dusk at their night camps so that the hungry sheep might browse on the luxuriant grass, but long before sun-up each morning they were in motion once more. It was mid-afternoon of the third day after the parting with Southwell that Spaulding sighted a large square house looming up on the mesa ahead, and when he drew near it he saw that the ancient building was painted green; from what Southwell had told him, it was undoubtedly the Casa Verde, where Don Montoya, to whom he bore Southwell's relinquishment, lived. They were at the journey's end, he hoped.

He halted the sheep and rode on alone to the house, and as he reined in at the picket fence enclosing the main building a tall, heavily-built Mexican came out the door and advanced to the fence. The man greeted Spaulding with a flickering smile and a query:

"Ola, senor. Theem sheep, they are yours?"

"Yes, they're mine, pardner," Spaulding told him. "I'm just in from over near the Texas line, and I'm lookin' for Don Guadalupe de Montoya. Is he here?"

"Don Guadalupe does not leeve here, senor," the other man informed, "Thees ees his ranch, yes, but he leeves 'n Lincoln, twelve mile further on. Hees ver' ol' man, an' does not come out here often. But eef eet 'appens, senor, that you would lak' to sell theem sheep, then perhaps I am the caporal of Casa Verde."

Spaulding shook his head.

"No, I'm not sellin', mister. On the other hand I might want to get a few good ewes from Don Montoya, good stock, if he has any he might sell. You see, I've bought a place somewhere near here from an ol' chap by name of Southwell, who I chanced to meet up with over Texas way, and I've come to stay. I've got a paper from Southwell to Don Montoya—my name's Spaulding."

"Ah!" the Mexican breathed, a gleam lighting his sombre eyes. "Es muy buen, senor Spauldin'. For to me you look lak a brave an' hones' man, an' much trouble weel soon come to us sheepmen, I'm theenk. I am Pablo Montoya, Don Guadalupe'a nephew; please come weeth me."

He led Spaulding around the house and pointed with a finger. Almost opposite them, but across a deep and narrow canyon, Spaulding saw a small house squatted in hardy isolation upon a commanding plateau. And even at that distance, nearly a mile, it seemed, somehow, to have an alert and watchful air about it.

"That—" said Pablo, "ees the house owned by my ol' amigo, Senor Southwell. I'm tak' care of eet for heem, Senor Spauldin,' an' have the key to the house. Eef you weesh, I weel go weeth you an' you can pen your sheep een the corral, then go eento Lincoln to see Don Guadalupe."

"That's plum' white of you, Montoya." For him, Spaulding spoke most heartily. "I'll do that very thing. I've heard something about the trouble you speak of, Pablo, but I don't scare easy. Let's go."

Spaulding found the Southwell shack a substantial one and in excel-

lent condition. It was scrupulously clean, probably due to Pablo's care. and climbed into the one mothetaen The corral, into which they drove the wearied sheep, was extensive and its walls were of piled stones, thre feet thick and five high. Keith Spaulding took it all in with a complacent expression upon his rugged old face.

"I think we got a bargain, Sally," he observed. "Now, whilst the boy and I unload the wagon you tidy yourself up a bit, then we'll drive into Lincoln to see Montoya and buy some chuck. You willin'?"

Sally smiled a happy response, for her heart was queerly light. If only Terry might happen along! But no, was her forlorn thought; Terry had gone north and was miles and miles away, no telling where—little chance that they would ever meet again. She stifled an involuntary sigh and went cheerfully about her tidying up. Spaulding and the Mexican lad, with the willing aid of Pablo, set about unloading the househol dgoods from the wagon. At that moment Terry Blake was in the bunk-house of the Leslie ranch, thinking of Sally.

Chapter VII

TERRY Blake circled the flank of El Capitan mountain, breasted a sharp rise, and drew rein upon its crest to breathe the jaded Redskin; he had traveled all night. He looked down upon a panorama of pastoral serenity. Through a V-shaped gap in the mountains he could see a narrow, canyon-like valley stretching away and abruptly widening in the distance, as a reversed funnel. A ribbon of silver ran down its middle marking the winding course of the Rio Bonita, the fertile fields upon either side of the stream seeming as contrasting ribbons of green. Sprawling upon the south bank of the Bonita at the narrowest part of the valley, where a thin line of cottonwoods reared loftily, a long row of buildings was visible through the shimmering heat-waves. Blake leaned over to pat Redskin's sweaty neck.

"Looks peaceful enough, Reddy," he murmured, "but looks are deceiving; this was Billy the Kid's hangout, poor devil."

Blake clucked to the horse, rode down the slope, and turned Redskin into a rutted road fetlock deep in dust, toward the town. The sun was straight overhead, the month was June, yet the heat was not oppressive. So still was the air of the cupped-in valley that Blake could hear the murmur of the asequia which watered the wayside orchards and the drone of bees among the flowering fruit trees.

He neared a large, rambling old house, set well back from the road amid a riot of apple trees, gnarled and unpruned, yet blooming bravely. Then he heard a voice lifted in a lilting song, painfully remindful of the one he had heard while lying in the Spaulding manger. For the first time in days the image of Sally Spaulding flashed before his mental vision. Blake slowed down, listening.

The singer was hidden from his view, but at one side of the house he could see the box of a well, and swinging from the rusted pulley above it a dripping oaken bucket. A graveled driveway wound from the road toward the well, and a picket gate hanging crazily from one hinge stood wide open; impulsively Blake turned Redskin into it.

The singing had ceased. Blake rode around a tangle of Cherokee

roses, then jerked Redskin to a halt. Standing beside the well and tilting the oaken bucket to pour its contents into an olla upon the curb was the singer. She stood slim and straight, with uplifted chin, chirping soft, liquid notes to a curious mocking bird perched upon a branch of the apple tree whch shaded the well. The girl wore a stiffly starched gown of cheap material, as freshly pink as the blossoms all about her. A sleeve had fallen back from one uplifted arm, baring its shapely curves to the shoulder; the skin was the color of rare old ivory.

SO absorbed was she that she had not heard the approach of the horse, nor did she see the cowboy until he had dismounted. Then she turned her head, not in alarm, but with easy, confident grace. Yet her eyes were wide and frowning as they rested upon the newcomer.

Terry Blake looked deep into their cloudy depths and something within him stirred strangely. They were not the usual dusky eyes of the Spanish race, but were slate gray, the color of a shaded pool of water; a heritage, little doubt, from one of Maxmillian's Irish adventurers, many of whom had wedded with the proudest blood of old Castile. Her hair, though, was brown.

Blake's stetson swept from his head.

"Buenos dias, senorita." His knowledge of the Spanish language failed him here." Please excuse me if I scared you; I only wanted a drink of water."

Coolly, with an almost insolent hauteur, the girl looked the uninvited visitor over from his head to his heels; the frowning creases between her eyes smoothed out, she smiled faintly.

"You do not frighten me, senor. W'y should you?" Save for a slight, softening elision the girl's English was perfect. "As for the water, I would be ver' glad eef you would help yourself."

She pointed to a gourd dipper on the well frame. Blake drank long and thirstily, then sighed in content.

"That went to the right spot, miss. It is plenty warm, and I've ridden a long way. Thank you a lot."

"Eet ees nothing. You are a stranger here, yes?"

"Yes, ma'am, I came from Texas; my name is Terry Blake."

"Terree Blake," the girl repeated after him. "That name, Terree, I have never heard before, I think. Eet sounds nice, though. You are a vaquero? A cowboy, Meester Blake?"

Blake grinned cheerfully, for the first time in hours.

"A sort of one, ma'am. At least, working cattle is about all I know. I'm looking for a riding job now."

"Ah! Then we may not be fr'ens, senor." The girl said this placidly, though her head lifted in proud challenge. "For, you see, I am Carmelita de Montoya. My father ees Don Guadalupe de Montoya. Once we owned much of thees—" one bare arm swept about in a vaguely inclusive gesture. "But now," she shrugged. "We own ver' leetle. We run sheep.

Her visitor's grin took on an intriguing quality.

"Well now, Miss Montoya, over in Texas we think right well of sheep; a lot of cattlemen run both—not together, of course, but on separate ranges. It works out all right generally."

"So? You like dam' sheep?" Miss Carmelita de Montoy's perfect brows

arched humorously. "Then you weel fin no riding job een Lincoln. For eef you ride here eet must be for John Compton, or Pat O'Hearn, or Captain Tomlison. And none of them like sheep. Your luck here een Lincoln ees out, Meester Blake."

Terry Blake's jaws clamped.

"So that is the way of it, huh? Well, we'll see about that. Anyway, my luck so far has been fine, Miss Montoya—for, you see, I have met you. And you are just about the prettiest thing I ever ran across. I'll be in Lincoln for awhile yet, ma'am, and I hope that I will see you again."

Miss Montoya stiffened; her gray eyes frosted. Then, as they probed into the sincere, honest ones of the cowboy, a slight, delicate flush tinted the ivory of her cheeks.

"Pouf!" she said lightly. "You deal in flattery, sir. And now, Meester Blake, eef you have had sufficient water—"

"Of course," Terry Blake said in haste. "I'm going right this minute. I thank you again, Miss Carmelita. Adios."

Carmelita said, but not so that the cowboy might hear.

"Hasta la vista, Terree Blake."

She watched the erect figure of the cowboy until it had rounded a bend in the road; she looked up at the still dallying mocking bird, her lips lips quirked in an arch little smile.

"Who can tell, chiquita?" she quiried.

THE town of Lincoln was the county seat of the county of the samename, a territory as large as the state of Pennsylvania. It had always been the county seat and, barring unforeseen events, doubtless would always be, for it possessed the prestige of mellow old age. As well as its tenets and traditions. One, both tenet and tradition, was that Lincoln was purely a cattle county, and that law, as represented by the whilom sheriff, was cattleman's law. The stockman who could round up the highest number of votes at election time put his own sheriff in office and he remained sheriff until the next turn of the wheel. Which was right and proper, according to public opinion. Meanwhile the law he administered was his patron's law, and in the constant bickerings of the cattlemen among themselves was always in his patron's favor. But as against outsiders all persons who did not earn their living by raising or working of cattle—the cowmen stood back-to-back, one and indivisible. At the present time John Compton's sheriff held office.

Lincoln was awakening from its midday siesta when Blake rode down its single mile-long street. Life, temporarily suspended, was stirring once more. A group of nearly naked brown skinned children romped in the shade of the trees, a motley array of flea infested curs rangnig at their heels. A rising breeze rustled the leaves of the cottonwoods and spun the chocolate dust of the street in whirling eddies. A flock of tiny sparrows twittered about the drippings of a roadside watering trough.

Beneath the sun warped plank awning of a long, low building, a general store, across the street from the trough a half-dozen men lounged somnolently. Roughly clad, hard-eyed white men, they were; virile men, Terry Blake noted. With but one exception. This was a small, lean, sallow-complected man of middle age, who displayed upon the lapel of his coat a shiny nickeled star. His straggling, drab-hued mustache was

noticeably shorter on one side, where he habitually chewed it. He wore better clothing than the other men, but wore them in a slovenly manner. About his waist was an open holster, bearing a graven revolver, one with a peculiarly innocuous look about it. In truth, the entire appearance of Sam Thorpe, the sheriff, was one of impotence, notwithstanding his conspicuous emblem of authority.

As Blake stopped to water his horse at the trough the sheriff straightened up.

"Who's that fella, Burke?"

The man addressed, Burke Collins, who was one of John Compton's henchmen, had been keenly observing the man across the street, and eyeing the blood-bay stallion with covetous longing.

"I don't know, Thorpe," Rollins said. "Never seen him before that I know of. He's ridin' a dam' good hawss, all right; and totin' two guns, yuh'll notice." He caught the sheriff's eye. "The hawss ain't branded."

"I see it ain't," Thorpe replied uncomfortably. "Looks like he's comin' over here; I'll ask him about it."

The cowboy was coming over, crossing the street in long strides. Blake stepped upon the gallery and nodded to the sheriff as he saw his official badge, then let his glance rove casually over the other men. He went into the store and called for a sack of Bull Durham tobacco and an extra book of papers, and when he strolled back to the doorway he paused to roll a cigaret. The sheriff was standing now.

" 'Lo, stranger; nice hawss you got," he observed.

"Uh-huh," said Blake.

"Ain't got no brand on him, has he?"

"Nope. You see, sheriff, I handraised that cayuse. I wouldn't slap a brand on him for a hundred dollars."

Thorpe persisted unwillingly, for Burke Rollins was scowling.

"Yuh got a bill o' sale, of course?"

THE cowboy's gray eyes chilled; he was beginning to get the import of the conversation. He spoke curtly:

"I don't need a bill of sale. I just told you that I raised the horse from a colt."

Sheriff Thorpe scratched his chin in doubt; there was something about this stranger's cold regard that he didn't much like. He glanced sideways at Rollins and received an emphatic nod of encouragement.

"We got a kinda rule in Lincoln, mister—"

"My name is Blake," the cowboy snapped.

"Er-r . . . As I was sayin', Blake," the officer resumed, not without swallowing first, "we got a rule in Lincoln that all unbranded hawsses must be took up by the sheriff an' held 'til the rider proves ownership. That is, onless we know the fella pussonly."

"Meaning that you must take up mine?" The cowboy's voice was almost purring.

The sheriff, beguiled by the mild tone, spoke with some firmness:

"That's right, Blake. I hafta take him up, much as I hate to do it. Course you can get witnesses to prove that he's your'n."

"Why, that's okey, Sheriff," the cowboy returned, much too gently. "I've got my witnesses right here." He circled a finger about the brass heads of the cartridges showing from the cylinder of the Colts in his holster. "There are six of them;

they'll tell you that the horse is mine whenever you want to hear them. So long, sheriff."

He took a final draw at his cigaret, tossed the stump at the officer's feet, and strolled across the street, not looking back. Sam Thorpe was scratching his chin again.

"Yuh goin' to let him get away with it, Thorpe?" the acquisitive Rollins queried fiercely. "If yuh do yuh'd might as well turn in your badge right now. Compton don't want that sort hangin' aroun' here."

Thorpe bridled.

"Who sed that he was goin' to hang aroun' here? He's ridin' outa town right now. An' if yuh want that hawss so bad, Rollins, yuh go get it yerself."

"I'm goin' to get it, by God!" Rollins averred.

Yet he evidently did not mean at once, for he made no move. The idlers watched the cowboy ride leisurely down the street. They saw him turn into a livery stable a block away, to emerge on foot a moment later with a bulging saddle-bag over an arm, and cross over to the Harley House. One of the men, who up to this time had said nothing, chuckled maliciously.

"He's puttin' up at the hotel permanent, it looks like—kinda call' your bluff, ain't he, Thorpe?"

Terry Blake, crossing the street, observed with curious interest that nearly all the buildings in sight were gaily decorated with black and yellow bunting and star-spangled flags. He entered the hotel, an unusually pretentious one for these parts, and registered. To the smiling desk clerk he said:

"I'm staying for awhile, pardner. Stake me to the best room you can spare. And I'd like a bath, too, if you can manage it."

"Can do," the alert young American replied. "But I can't promise you a Hoffman House room now; this is fiesta time, you know, and the hotel is full up. But I'll stow you away somewhere and switch you in a day or so."

He tapped the call bell; a Mexican lad, attired for the occasion in the picturesque costume of a caballero, came trotting up. He led Blake to a small back room, pointed out the bath at the end of the hall and provided a towel. Blake handed him a quarter.

"After I clean up—" he managed to tell the boy in his halting Spanish, "I want to nap awhile—I rode all night. Call me about supper time, will you?"

The bell-boy showed gleaming white teeth in a broad grin.

"Sure thing, pardner. I'll be right on the job."

"Hold on a minute," the cowboy grinned back, "that's worth another quarter. And I'll make a deal with you—you teach me to speak English and I'll teach you Mex. What say?"

Chapter VIII

IT was widely affirmed, and generally admitted, that the cattle kingdom of Lincoln county was, like old Gaul, divided into three parts. One of these parts was John Compton's, who resided in the town of Lincoln, his ranch, known as the Triangle, being but a few miles out. Pat O'Hearn, another of the uncrowned rulers, ran his cattle in the extreme northern end of the county, and his headquarters ranch was at Joncta. It was called the Scissors. Captain Tomlison, the third and lesser potentate, maintained his place of business at

Pichaco, over east, and grazed his steers close to the Texas line, sometimes across it. His spread he had named the Santa Rosa. Each of the ranches was built upon, and surrounded by, a comparatively few acres of owned land, but the vast business of cattle raising was conducted upon public range, by law grass lands free to all men alike.

John Compton lived in a large, barn-like brick house at the extreme end of the single street of the town, and it was there that the three cattle kings customarily met for their frequent conferences. These men were rich and powerful; men of average honesty; of more than average ability, hospitable and generous to a fault. But in all matters which affected their livestock interests they were ruthless and utterly without scruple. Each of them habitually employed men who were paid double wages because of their proficiency with a six-gun, and readiness to use it at the command of their employer. Burke Rollins was one of these men, on the Triangle pay-roll.

Pat O'Hearn and Tomlison were in Lincoln now, ostensibly to attend the annual fiesta, but in truth at the behest of John Compton. The three were seated about a table in Compton's home, a quart bottle of bourbon, a siphon of soda, and a box of cigars before them.

John Compton was morose and scowling, but Pat O'Hearn, as jolly a freebooter as ever ran up the black flag, and who delighted in baiting his old friend, was grinning as if vastly pleased at somethng. Captain Tomlison, reserved and inscrutable always, was calmly serious, taking no part in the heated argument. Compton slammed a jarring fist down on the table top.

"Damn sheep!" he ejaculated savagely. "The stinking beasts are crowding us off the range. I wish to God I'd never smelled one."

O'Hearn laughed boisterously.

"It seems to me—" he taunted, "that I can recall whin you minded the smell of the woolies divvle a bit, John; whin ye ran them yourself on this same range. Sheep have been here ivver since I can remember and we've managed to keep topside the earth. Whativver in particular is there to get into a sweat about now?"

Compton glared redly at his tormentor, then catching the delighted gleam in Pat's eyes, he achieved a mirthless smile.

"You haven't the gumption of a sheep, you addle-pated mick," he retorted, then continued soberly: "But I'm telling you, Pat, that you will be singing a different song before long; much sooner than you have an idea. There's plenty to sweat about, hombre."

"Compton is right, O'Hearn," Tomlison interposed in his calm, decisive manner. "Listen to me patiently, please, for a moment. The situation is bad and steadily growing worse; it will soon become serious if something is not done about it. It is, in fact, serious now, for you as well as for Compton and me. Because you are not on this immediate range will make no difference in the end; you will suffer as we will.

"Sheep have been little more than a nuisance heretofore; we have succeeded in preventing them from becoming a menace by methods that were—well, adequate. Methods possible, however, with only the Mexican sheepmen. But recently white men have been drifting in here in numbers, most of them bringing sheep. They are a different type en-

tirely, too independent, and they are setting an example that the Mexicans will be prompt to follow. Old Don Guadalupe Montoya has been quick to sense the opportunity and has been getting busy; encouraging the Mexicans to get more sheep, adding to his own flocks, and quietly spurring his people up to the point of resistance by force—**armed resistance,** I fear.

"Montoya is a power among the Mexican element, as you well know. The most of them still regard him as the alcalde of Lincoln, which he was for years. As physically feeble as Montoya is, he is dangerous, for he is smart, wily and unafraid.

"Last week we were informed, Compton and I, that he is now banding the sheepmen, whites and Mexicans, into a unit—you can imagine what his purpose is. At this moment if they had an able, bold and physically fit leader to direct them they might quickly get out of hand. And mind you, O'Hearn, that should the greater part of the sheepmen rally together they would outnumber all the men you and Compton and I could possibly throw into a fight—and they will fight if properly led.

"Wait," he checked O'Hearn with a lift of a hand as the Irishman opened his lips to speak. "I am almost through, Pat. You may choose to make light of the danger, but I think that is only on the surface, for you know as well as I do that once the word gets abroad that Lincoln county is wide open to sheepmen, and safely so, sheep will swarm into here in countless numbers. You know what that will mean in the end. There is no law to prevent them coming in—**it is squarely up to us.**

"Guadalupe Montoya should have been treated long ago like many others were treated—put out of business. But the bald truth is that we were all afraid of him, of his influence, and frankly we had right to be. But now he must be dealt with; the sheep must be dealt with. **Or we quit business."**

TOMLISON had spoken most impressively and O'Hearn had a great respect for the ex-army officer's judgment. O'Hearn spoke now, soberly and ruminatively.

"So it's that bad? But, for one, I wouldn't want to see old Montoya hurted, Tomlison."

"Physically, no," said Tomlison. "That would be the last thing any of us would want; it is unthinkable. Nor will it be necessary. But his activities must in some way be stopped, and the white sheepmen must be taught a salutary lesson."

"Then dom it to hell! We'll teach 'em," the choleric Irishman exploded. "We will clean the sheep out, Montoya's first of all, as we done many the time before. And we'll sind the white spalpeens back where they came from, wid their tails between their legs. I'll sind some men down whin I get back to the Scissors, who will be the boys to help do it. Will you take charge of them, Compton?"

John Compton growled a quick assent, but Tomlison shook his head.

"You are both going too fast. Whatever we do must first be carefully considered, and we must act with caution. There is no need for me to tell you that since the nation wide publicity following the slaying of Billy the Kid, public sentiment has been gradually turning against the cattlemen. We cannot afford any more publicity now, or before we know it there will be federal interference from Washington. At pres-

ent the army officers out here are favorable to us."

"That's true enough," Compton said grudgingly, "I've had it in mind myself. Well, what do you suggest, Tomlison?"

"Let me think it over for a few days. We are agreed now, I believe, that quick and drastic action is required. When we start there can be no turning back, we must go through —the fortunes of each of us hangs in the balance. How would it do for us to meet here again one week from today?"

"Suits me," said Pat O'Hearn, cheerful once more. "I'll be here wid the bells on. Pour me a drink, John."

Terry Blake aroused at the insistent rapping of the bell-boy upon his door.

"Okey, pardner," he sang out, leaping from the bed.

He felt wonderfully refreshed by his rest, and somehow curiously elated and content, as if after tortuous wanderings on an unmarked trail he had at last come within sight of his goal. He went to the window and looked out. The sun had settled down behind the distant Sierra Blanca's and the valley was fast filling with creeping shadows; lights were springing up here and there; the plank walks beneath the wooden awnings of the stores clattered with the tread of many feet; the hum of voices, melody of song, trilling laughter, an occasional strident yell and the whimpering neigh of a restive horse blended in a cacophony of exhilarating sound.

The cowboy's eyes lifted to the towering bulk of distant El Capitan, a huge bluish shape in the gathering dusk, remote and mysterious. Suddenly, as he watched, the purple dome mirrored a face, witching in its loveliness, with cloudy gray eyes and curved, prideful lips . . . Blake smiled pensively. Then, as a kaleidoscope shifts its scenes, the image dissolved and another slowly took its place; and now the eyes were sapphire blue and the lips were smiling roguishly from a freckled face. Terry Blake's smile became a puzzled frown.

Blake dressed himself with unusual care; this was fiesta night and he felt equally ready for a frolic or a fight. He went down into the hotel lobby, and up to the desk to leave his key. The clerk stared in surprise at this freshly shaven, laughing cowboy who had gone up to his room a haggard, dust-whitened rover.

The cowboy was wary and alert, knowing that his run-in with the sheriff might well have an aftermath; he glanced keenly about the crowded lobby. Seated in a corner of it was a young Mexican, a mere boy, and a truly dashing figure. The boy was costumed, obviously for the fiesta, as a Spanish don, with wide-bottomed velvet trousers slashed with scarlet inserts, a ruffled shirt of soft, sheer linen, a flowing tie, a bolero of cloth-of-gold and an elaborate steeple hat braided with gilt. He was a gallant figure of a caballero, and to the cowboy there was something vaguely reminiscent about his face. The lad happened to catch Blake's questing gaze and he smiled spontaneously. Blake returned it.

He entered the dining room, already thronged, and found a small table at one end of the room. A moment later the young don came in and peered about for a vacant seat. Seeing the unoccupied place at the cowboy's table he came to it.

"Thees seat, senor?" he made courteous enquiry, "Eet ees spoken for?"

For some reason Blake was glad that the boy had come.

"Why, no, amigo," said he. "Slide into it before some hungry jigger beats you to it. I'm glad to have company."

THE young Mexican took the seat, placing his peaked hat carefully down on the floor beside him. He grinned at Blake.

"That sombrero cost me fifty pesos een Juarez," he informed, "I'm take damn good care of eet, senor."

"I would, too, if it belonged to me," Blake returned. "Do you live here, youngster?"

"For sure; I am born een Lincoln. I am Felipe de Montoya."

The youth said this with unconscious pride. This, Blake thought quickly, accounted for the haunting resemblance which had puzzled him. The boy was Carmelita's brother. He kept the discovery to himself, however, and said:

"I am glad to know you, Montoya. My name is Terry Blake and I just blew in from Texas. This country is all new to me, but I have a hunch that I am going to like it a lot."

"Yes, eet ees a fine countree, senor Blake," Montoya agreed with enthusiam. Then he covertly regarded the cowboy rig of his visavis. "You are een the cattle business, Senor Blake?

"Oh, sometimes in cattle and sometimes in sheep," Blake replied with elaborate inaccuracy.

Perplexity was written upon Felipe's expressive countenace.

"But, senor, how can that be? Ees eet that you have the sheep and cattle together in Texas?"

"Not on the same range, no. But there's money in both if they are handled right; so that they won't cross each other up."

"I se-e," young Montoya said thoughtfully, although it was plain that he did not see. Nor did Terry Blake, for that matter. Montoya enquired.

"You work for someone een Lincoln, senor Blake?"

"Not yet. As I said, I've just landed here. I don't want to take on a cow punching job for awhile. I'd like to get the lay of the land first."

Felipe Montoya studied the other's face with shrewd, speculative eyes for some seconds. Blake, noting this swiftly, decided that the boy might be more mature than he appeared to be. Montoya's gaze swept somewhat furtively about the dining room; he leaned over the table.

"Perhaps, Meester Blake, my father might advise you capably. He ees Don Guadalupe de Montoya, an' he has leeved long in this countree; once he was the alcalde of Lincoln. Might eet be that you would lak' to meet heem?"

Since this was what he had been angling for, the cowboy's reply was hearty:

"Why, I'd like it fine, Felipe. Do you think that you could arrange it?"

"I'm theenk so," Felipe said complacently. "Tomorrow, perhaps, eef eet suits you."

"Any time will suit me," Blake told him. "Will you come by here and let me know, Felipe?"

"For sure, amigo; at ten o'clock tomorrow." He pushed his chair back, having only toyed with the food before him. "An' now weel you excuse me, Meester Blake?" His smile was ingenuous. "Tonight ees fiesta an' I'm play a leetle poker een El Palacio. Perhaps you would lak to join us w'en you are feenish here?"

"No, thank you, Felipe; maybe some other time. I might drop in later to look on, but that will be all. I'm hoping you will have muy buena fortuna."

BLAKE finished his supper leisurely; he rolled and lighted a cigaret and sat thinking for quite awhile, his eyes turned stern and sombre. At last he arose and made his way through the crowd to the friendly clerk.

"Where is the El Palacio, pardner? It's a gambling hall, I think."

"Don't I know it?" the clerk said sadly. He jerked a thumb over a shoulder. "It's right next door. Go out to the street and turn into the next door to the north and you're there—and in a couple of hours you'll wish that you wasn't."

Blake chuckled and went out, pausing on the porch of the hotel to look about him. The walks were teeming with people; young Spanish-Americans in gala attire, generally with a fair senorita clinging American fashion to their arms, swaggered by. Cowboys, some in their best bib and tucker, others just as they had ridden off the range, stood leaning against the walls, watching the parade with envious eyes. A few roughly clad miners, prospectors, skin-draped shepherds and barefoot mozos mingled democratically with their social betters. All were good natured, smiling. It was an entertaining sight to the Texas cowboy and he stood enjoying the novelty of it for nearly an hour. Tiring then, he strolled into the shadows of the porch and hitched his two guns into position, for he had not forgotten the incident at the store. He pushed through the swinging doors of El Palacio.

He was in an enormous square hall, ablaze with the light of scores of kerosene lamps suspended from the ceiling. All of the major activities of the saloon were in this one room, although a number of closed doors leading from it hinted at private entertainment that might be procurable. An entire end of the hall was given over to an ornate, bemirrored mahogany bar; the remainder was used for gambling devices of all sorts. All were in the open. The room was jammed and a bedlam of noise and confusion; a thin, suffocating dust stirred from the sanded floor.

Blake caught a bartender's eye and called for rye whiskey. The bartender slapped a bottle and a glass upon the bar.

"You'll have to pour it yourself," he enjoined, "I haven't got time to wait on you tonight, friend. Damn all fiestas, anyway. Keep your own tally and leave the money on the counter when you get enough. Two bits a drink."

Blake nodded. He poured himself a drink and while slowly savoring the potent liquor stared interestedly about. At the extreme end of the room, well removed from the clamor about the bar, were the poker tables, and at one young Montoya sat with five other players. The cowboy noticed that they were not using chips as counters, but were making their bets with silver and gold—a stiff game, all right, he thought.

He let his gaze roam slowly over the other men at the table. The one next to Felipe was a man as young as he; a clean, fresh-faced youth in the garb of the cattle range. Beside him sat a florid man, well dressed and prosperous seeming, doubtless an important cattleman. Blake wondered if he might be John Compton. His eyes rested briefly upon the next

two, professional gamblers indubitably.

Blake's gaze went on to the last man—the cowboy started, his eyes turning hot and fierce. For the man was Jake Hall. Terry Blake was engulfed in a sea of surging passion; his brain reeled and the palms of his hands went dry. With a great effort of will he fought back to self control, and he was surprised to see that his hand was trembling. He refilled his glass with liquor and held it at arm's length until the twitching of his muscles had entirely ceased. He downed the liquor at a gulp, tossed a dollar upon the counter, then strolled carelessly down the hall, to seat himself unobtrusively in a chair along the wall behind the Muleshoe gambler.

APPARENTLY no one in the poker game paid him the slightest attention. Felipe, feverishly engrossed in the game, certainly did not see him. The boy's face was flushed, his eyes glittering with excitement, and from the small stack of dollars remaining before him, Blake surmised that he had been losing, probably more than he could afford. The large rancher was making his bets indifferently, as though the stakes were of small interest to him; he was laughing at and joshing his fellow players with each deal.

From his vantage point Blake followed the game intently, watching every move of Hall's supple fingers. Yet for some time he detected nothing amiss, although Hall was raking in the pots with monotonous regularity. The deal came around to Hall again and, all at once, the cowboy's figure tensed; he leaned forward. A moment and he arose, walked swiftly to the gambler's side, and placed a hand lightly upon his shoulder. He spoke in a conversational tone, but clearly, so that all might hear:

"Hello, Jake. I see you're at your old game again."

That was all, a seemingly casual observation, but Jake Hall's reaction was instantaneous. It was he who panicked now. His head flung up, the hand which was extended in the act of dealing poised in mid-air, the card it held fluttered down upon the table top. Then the same hand stole inch-by-inch toward his shirt bosom . . . with the stiff, jerky movement of an automaton his head turned so that he looked up into the speaker's face . . . then as swiftly as a cat pounces he was on his feet . . . a blunt derringer was in his hand . . he fired in the act of rising, straight at Terry Blake's bosom.

Yet as incredibly fast as had been the action the cowboy was prepared. He lunged aside and though none of the observers knew just how, a Colt had leapt from its holster into his grip. The gambler fired first by the merest fraction of a second and his ball tugged at Blake's loose coat in its passage. Then Jake Hall was swaying on his feet . . . sagging, face downward, upon the card table.

The other players had sat transfixed at the appalling suddenness of the tragedy, but now the cattleman sprang erect, his countenance livid with rage.

"Damn your soul!" he raged at Blake. "What the hell? Why did you shoot that man?"

"Just a minute, suh." Blake spoke gently, but his voice had the sound of a rasp upon metal. "I shot to save my life—you saw that. I know this man. His name is Hall, a gambler from Texas. Look here."

Almost as if compelled against his

will, the cattleman stooped, bending far over, until he could see where the cowboy's finger pointed. To the underside of the card table where Jake Hall's right hand had rested was affixed a small rubber suction cap, and held by a tiny clip so lightly that the merest touch would dislodge it was a card. Terry Blake withdrew the card and flipped it face up upon the table. The card was an ace of spades.

"Right handy contrivance, suh," the cowboy observed dryly.

The large man stared at the card; he jerked the suction cup loose and examined it closely. Then he expelled his breath in a whistling snort.

"The lowdown, measly crook!" he exclaimed, "I hope to god you killed him."

"I didn't kill him." The cowboy's voice was emotionless. "My ball passed through the fleshy part of his shoulder. He will be as good as new in a week."

The cattleman regarded the speaker curiously, a gleam of respect in his bold eyes.

"How do you know where your ball went? You firing from the hip while you were dodging his fire?"

Blake smiled thinly, and the other man felt an odd sensation at the base of his spine.

"I always know where my lead is going, else I don't pull the trigger. My name is Blake—Terry Blake—also from Texas. I am putting up at the hotel next door. When the sheriff comes tell him that he'll find me there. And, please suh, have a doctor look after this fella—I'll pay his bill, of course."

He turned away.

"Wait!" the other man commanded. "I'm John Compton. Come see me tomorrow morning; anybody will tell you where I live. You needn't fret about the shootin'; I'll fix it with the sheriff. I want to have a talk with you. Sabe?"

"All right, suh."

Blake flung this indifferently over a shoulder as he plowed his way through the incrowding throng.

Chapter IX

BLAKE sat down in the hotel lobby, mulling over in his mind the crowded happenings of the day. He marvelled at the strange fate which had brought him face to face with the Muleshoe gambler in this out-of-the-way corner of the world. And still more was he puzzled at the last minute impulse which had so irresistibly prompted him to spare Jake Hall's life. For at sight of the man to whom he owed all his misfortune and who had made him a wanderer upon the face of the earth, sitting in the same posture and with the same cynical expression upon his face as when he had seen him last, a lust to slay such as he had never felt before had gripped him. He would kill Jake Hall! But at the last moment...

Terry Blake knew with an unshakable conviction that he could have done so; not at any moment had he felt a tremor of fear for himself, not for a moment had he had any doubt as to the issue. And now with this reflection he was suddenly seized by a sweeping sense of invulnerability, and a compelling urge to put it to the test again and again. Terry Blake shivered, though the night was warm—he had been told that this bestial hunger to slay was the sign mark of the confirmed man hunter. Was he, indeed, on the way to becoming one?

His unhappy chain of thought was broken as he saw two men enter the

lobby and shoulder their way through the crowd toward him. Blake sat up alertly—Jake Hall might have friends. Then he recognized Felipe Montoya, and with him the young cowboy who had sat in the poker game.

"Ullo, Meester Blake," Felipe sang out before they had come up to him. Then more discreetly: "You lef' so queeck we lose sight of you. Thees dam' greengo here ees Bruce McFarlan'. We are companeros, an' I would lak for you to know heem. Bruce ees also a vaquero."

Blake stood up, extending his hand.

"I'm glad to know a friend of Felipe's, McFarland. But I hope that you're a better cowboy than you are a gambler."

McFarland laughed, working Blake's hand up and down like a pump handle. Blake felt a tug at his heart, the boy was so like Bob Rand in manner.

"I hope so, too, Mr. Blake," said he, "though my foreman would probably say that I'm not. Thanks for showing up that tin-horn; he's been drawing my pay for a month or more. By the way, the fella is all right—shot just where you told Compton that he was. Hall was asking for you after he came to."

"I won't be hard to find," said Blake grimly.

"Oh, no, Blake; don't get me wrong." McFarland hastened to say. "Hall is not looking for trouble. On the other hand, he told Sam Thorpe that he wasn't making any charge against you; that he had drawn first, and that you could easily have killed him if you had wanted to. I think that he only wants to square himself with you."

"Well, that's fair enough." Blake was anxious to change the subject, and did: "What's the matter with you two caballeros? With a whole herd of muy bonita muchachas stampeding through the streets can't you throw your loop on a couple?"

"For sure," Felipe grinned. "We are feexin' to do that right now. But first I come to remin' you of tomorrow. You weel be here at ten? Before you see John Compton?"

There was an anxious note in Felipe's voice. Blake reassured him.

"You can count on me being here, Montoya. There's no rush about me seeing Compton. I don't know that I want to see him at all; I'm not particularly keen about the gentleman."

"Oh, but no, Terree," Felipe said this earnestly. "John Compton ees all right; heem a big man aroun' here. Don' mak' heem mad. Bruce, here, he rides for the Triangle. But we keep you, senor. We go now to roun' up theem muchachas, as you say." Felipe grinned. "Maybeso, they plentee hot under collar already, that we mak' theem wait so long."

"Good night, boys; good hunting," Blake said absently, wondering again at the relief that had swept over him at the confimation of his belief that Hall was not badly hurt. He went on up to his room.

AT that identical moment John Compton was closeted with Sheriff Thorpe in the latter's office in the jail. They had been conversing earnestly for some minutes, or rather, the cattleman had been questioning, Thorpe replying.

"So Blake called your bluff, did he?" Compton chuckled. "You're lucky that he didn't do more. I've told Rollins before that some day his and your stunt of lifting broncs off of strangers would backfire. Oh, don't squirm, Sam, it's no skin off my be-

hind. I suppose that you look at it as a sort of prequisite of your high office, and I'm only mentioning it for your own good. You can hold 'em all up as far as I am concerned.

"Now, listen to me, Thorpe. I can use that man Blake. He's a gun-man if I ever saw one, and they are always for hire. I want you to find out all about him. Blake won't tell you much himself, for he's not the talkin' kind, but that gambler Hall knew him in Texas, and no doubt he can tell you a lot. Make Hall open up before you chase him out of town; if he clams up on you slap him in jail and charge him with something. You get me?"

"Sure, I get you," Sam Thorpe said importantly. "Hall's already in jail, but only because I thought he'd be safer there tonight—he's skinned about everybody in town with that slick stuff Blake showed up, and some of 'em are mighty sore. He didn't mind being locked up a-tall. Tomorrow I'll tell him he can go on condition that he spills all he knows about Blake. He'll come through, don't fret."

"All right, then," said Compton. "I'm going home now. You get the dope on Blake the first thing tomorrow. Blake is coming to see me and I want it when he does. Good night, Sam."

Promptly at ten o'clock the next morning Felipe Montoya showed up at the Harley House; Blake was waiting for him. It was but a short half-mile to the Montoya place so they walked. Felipe was in an illy suppressed state of ebullition; finally he could stand the inner pressure no longer. He burst out:

"I tol' Don Guadalupe w'at you do to that gambler, Hall. My, how he enjoy eet! Not for long time has he laugh so. Also Carmelita—" the boy looked slyly at his companion, "she's my seester. But she don' feel so good about eet; she don' laugh much. Carmelita's a girl, an' she theenk, maybe, how that gambler shoot straighter, then you don' come weeth me today.

"You weel lak' Carmelita for sure, Terree; she ees ver' fine girl. She go to school een El Paso an' at convent een Albuquerque. But our madre ees dead long time, an' often Carmelita get sad an' lonely, all by herself."

Felipe broke off, with wide, innocent eyes.

"But do I tire you, senor, that I talk so much about her?"

"Oh, no," Blake assured him quickly. "If I am going to tie up with your father maybe, then naturally I am interested in your family."

"That ees jus' fine!" the voluble Felipe said. "Then I tell you, Terree. We 'ave a duenna who stay weeth Carmelita; she was weeth my madre befo'. Dolores ees ver' ol' an' 'ave long face lak' horse, but she's faithful mozo an' tak' care of Carmelita lak' her own child."

"That's nice for Miss Montoya," commented Blake.

"Yes, eet ees nice. W'at ees mo' eet ees vr' good for Carmelita," he revealed darkly: "For she 'ave won heelluva temper an' sometime she not so easy to manage."

"Shucks, Felipe," the cowboy incautiously objected: "Your sister hasn't a bad temper; she is just high strung."

THE boy glanced up into his companion's face, his expression

"W'at you say, Meester Blake? How you know w'at temper Carmelita may have? Ees eet, then, that you see her sometime?"

Blake gulped.

"Oh, I guess I was just talking to hear myself talk, Felipe," he said lamely.

The Mexican lad stopped in his tracks, doubled over in mirth. The cowboy stared at him sourly. After a moment the boy straightened up and dried the tears from his eyes.

"Forgeeve me, amigo," he said winningly, "I'm onlee mak' fun. Me, I'm see Carmelita an' you w'en you talk at the well. An' w'en you go I hear Carmelita speak to theem mocking bird weeth funny look on her face—that ees w'y I smile at you een hotel. Would you lak' for to hear w'at Carmelita say to theem mocking bird, Terree?"

Blake conquered an inclination to laugh.

"You are a damn sight too fresh for your own good, young Montoya," said he severely. "If your sister wants me to know what she said, she will probably tell me herself."

"Yes-s," agreed Felipe pensively, but with dancing eyes. "That may be best."

Don Guadalupe de Montoya was a tall, stately man, now stooped and enfeebled from age. His hair was snow white, and his manner that of a grandee of Spain. He welcomed his guest with exquisite courtesy. He spoke with the same soft, caressing accent as his daughter.

"Felipe has tol' me of you, Senor Blake, an' I am mos' 'appy to mak' your acquaintance. These poor premises are your won; weel you be so kin' as to be seated. We 'ave some wine of our own vintage, senor, eet ees not so good as I would lak' to offer, but perhaps you might fancy eet."

"Not right now, if you don't mind, Don Guadalupe," said the cowboy. "We will talk a bit first, then I know that I will enjoy it. It is a little early for me, you know."

Don Guadalupe nodded assent, and Blake continued:

"I suppose that Felipe has told you, Don Guadalupe, that I have been working cattle and that I am looking for a job here?"

"Yes, that ees w'at Felipe said. Eet might be that I could interes' you een something, senor, but eet would not be cattle. I have none now."

"Never min' heem cattle," the impetuous Felipe broke in. "Meester Blake come here, mi padre, to talk about **sheep.**"

"S-s-sh, Felipe," Don Guadalupe chided. "For a boy you talk too much an' too fas'. W'at Senor Blake would confer weeth me about ees not for you to say. Perhaps you weel close the door w'en you go out?"

Felipe's grin at Blake was chagrinned, but his obedience was prompt.

"Forgeeve me, mi padre. I go now an' you weel not be disturb. W'n you have feenish weeth my father, Terree, perhaps you would lak' to be introduce to my seester, Carmelita?"

Said Blake:

"Of course I would, Felipe; provided it is agreeable to Miss Montoya."

"Oh, I'm theenk that she weel not min' so much."

The boy's countenance was wholly guileless; he closed the door gently.

HIGH noon, the overhead sun informed Blake. This reminded him that he was hungry, prosaically so for a susceptible male who had spent an hour with a lovely gray-eyed maid in a bougainvillea-draped patio. He stepped out briskly

toward the Harley House, and when he entered the lobby he saw Jake Hall sitting alone in a secluded corner. The cowboy's hesitation was but momentary; he crossed the lobby to the gambler's side.

"Hello, Hall," he greeted quietly.

The gambler looked up—his face was drawn and pale and his right arm was in a sling.

"Hello, Blake," he answered with equal calm. "I have been waiting for you. Sit down for a minute; I have something to say to you."

Blake dragged up a chair.

"How's the arm, Jake? Hurting much?"

"No, not now. It gave me a little hell last night for awhile, but it is only a flesh wound. I want to get this off my mind first, Blake. I wasn't out last night, I only pretended to be. So I heard all that you said to Compton. But even if I hadn't I'd known that you could have killed me as easy as not. In fact, when I looked up I thought that you were going to, and I wished that I had learned to play a harp. I saw death in your eyes, all right; if I hadn't I might not have pressed the bet.

"Why you changed your mind at the last minute is your own affair; I'm not asking you anything about it. You had good cause to finish me and I know that it wasn't for fear of consequences, because everyone saw me draw first. I am only a crooked cardsharp, Blake, but I'm not a sidewinder, so I'm not forgetting it. Maybe sometime—

Blake, acutely uncomfortable, interrupted him:

"Oh hell, Jake. Let's not talk about it anymore. I'm glad all over that you're not hurt badly. We'll just forget it, and the next time we meet up the drinks will be on me—right now, if you feel like a long one."

"No, thanks, not now," said Hall. "I haven't time to loaf. Now listen, Blake. What I really came by for is to give you a straight tip. I'm dragging it right away; I've been ordered to leave town—which wasn't at all necessary. And I earned a free pass. Can you guess how?"

Blake shook his head, and the gambler continued:

"Sheriff Thorpe propositioned me. He agreed that he would make no charge against me, and I could go scott free, if I spilt all I know about you—by John Compton's order. That sounded queer to me in view of some things I already knew. I don't like either the sheriff or his boss a little bit, so I handed him out a line of talk to suit him. I know hardly anything about you, Blake, nevertheless I let on that I knew a lot and told Thorpe a plenty; I figured that if I could make you out tough enough he would be more likely to lay off of you. He's only an imitation sheriff, you know.

"Now, Blake, I haven't been here for a month with my ear to the ground for nothing; in my business we have to know what's going on, or the first thing we know the water is too hot for us. Listen to this. John Compton, Pat O'Hearn and Captain Tomlison had a secret pow-wow at Compton's house yesterday. For some time rumors have been going around that they were preparing for another war on the sheepmen and I think now that the time has come. And that Compton's idea is to use you for his raw work, thinking that you are a professional gunman. He does think that, so does Thorpe, but I happen to know that you are far from being one.

"I know that you can take care of

yourself but I thought a straight tip as to what's in the wind would do you no harm. That's why I stopped by here."

"Considering that I have shot you up twice, Jake, that is right square of you." There was genuine feeling in Blake's voice. "What you have told me is not all news, but it fills out some gaps and helps a lot. And I thank you. I've got a sort of line on Compton, but little on the other two. What do you know about O'Hearn and Tomlison?"

"I don't know anything at all about Tomlison; no one seems to know very much," said Hall. "The report is that he is a cashiered army officer, which, if true, means that he is probably a crook. Further than that all I know is that he is said to be the brains of the Compton, O'Hearn, Tomlison combine. Pat O'Hearn is the best of the three, I've been told." Hall smiled. "Just yesterday I heard a yarn about O'Hearn which may give you a line on him. It seems that he contracted to deliver three hundred steers to the Navajos for beef, to be paid for by the government, of course. The Indian Agency sent a new, green man out to check them when they were delivered by O'Hearn. The steers were for old Crooked Ear's bunch.

"O'Hearn told the man from the agency that being as he was a little inexperienced in tallying cattle that the steers would be dribbled through a narrow pass between two hills so that they might be counted more easily. That suited the agency man.

"Then O'Hearn got together with Crooked Ear — O'Hearn's hands would drive one hundred head slowly through the pass; Chief Crooked Ear's braves would then shove 'em around the hill and back through again. In that way O'Hearn and Crooked Ear would divide the price of the two hundred head not delivered, which would mean a lot of firewater for the Indians, beating beef thre ways from the jack.

"Well everything went fine, until toward the last the agency man looked at Pat O'Hearn suspiciously and said, 'It seems to me, Mr. O'Hearn, that I saw that one horned steer pass here twice before.'

"Was O'Hearn stumped? Not so you could notice it. He told the agency man: 'Oh, those were other steers. You see, some of my steers have a triflin' disease we call hornbend; whin the weather is hot like 'tis now ofttimes a horn twists up like a corkscrew and stabs the animal in the eye. So we saw 'em off forninst. There has been three of 'em gone by, but 'tis no matter—I'll bill 'em to ye at the price of one horn."

Blake laughed; the gambler went on:

"That's O'Hearn. He is tricky and quick on the trigger, but he's not mean. His men swear by him. But taken together the three make a muy malo combination. Now I've got to go."

Terry Blake stood up and held out his hand.

"Adios, Jake. We'll meet up again some time."

"Not if I see you coming. So long."

His hunger forgotten, Terry Blake stood on the sidewalk and watched the man he had twice shot plod across the street to where his horse was hitched, mounted it awkwardly, and rode away. Where the Carrizozo road turned off Jake Hall looked back and seeing Blake, waved his one serviceable hand: Terry Blake raised both of his above his head, palms

out, in the age-old token of peace, and held them there until the gambler vanished from sight. As he turned away he saw Sheriff Thorpe approaching, walking rapidly.

Chapter X

"HOWDY Blake; I been lookin' all over town for you." The sheriff said with an aggrieved air. "John Compton had been expectin' you at his house all mornin'."

"That's r i g h t!" the cowboy slapped his thigh. "Darned if I hadn't forgotten all about it. Where would I be likely to find him now, Thorpe?"

"He's over at my offiss. He waited 'til after dinner, then he came down town an' sent me out to fin' you. An' durn near walked myself to death."

The sheriff's manner was accusing. Blake said:

"I'm sorry, Thorpe; I was knocking around. I guess I had better go over and see him pronto, before I eat. Coming along?"

Thorpe grunted and fell in beside the cowboy; they walked to the jail together. Compton was tilted back in the sheriff's chair, puffing at a long and very black cigar; its smoke was rising to the ceiling in quick, angry plumes. He addressed the cowboy irritably, without preliminary salutation:

"Took your time about coming, didn't you?"

Blake sat down and pushed his hat back from his face.

"I didn't see any need to hurry, Mr. Compton," he replied serenely. "I'll be here for some time."

"Maybe." Compton emphasized the word. "You looking for a job, Blake?"

"Not right away, suh." The cowboy's lips smiled, but not his eyes. "You see, I'm still feeding on last year's cut of hay."

Compton's jaw squared; he tossed the stub of his cigar into a spittoon and sat up. He asked with calculated abruptness:

"How about that man you killed in Clayton?"

Blake regarded him silently, a puzzled expression on his face. Then he recollected what Jake Hall had told him and resisted an inclination to snicker.

"Oh, him? Hell, he was only a breed Apache."

His inquisitor appeared to think the explanation adequate.

"Hum-m. But what about the one in Amarillo? Now don't stall."

Blake was beginning to enjoy this, but he wished that he had secured a complete casualty list from Hall. He replied with a show of indignation.

"That fella drew first—everyone around saw him. He shot a button off my coat, just like that."

Blake snapped a finger in illustration.

John Compton stared moodily at the cowboy for some seconds, and when he spoke again his voice was laden with menace.

"Same old alibis, huh? Now see here, fella. We have your record and it's a bad one. Here in Lincoln we don't butt into any man's private affairs, but no dam gunman can stay in the county unless he has a job to keep him out of trouble. That goes as it lays."

"Yessur, by Jinks! it sho' does," the sheriff seconded, but not with convincing ardor.

"Shut up, Thorpe," C o m p t o n snapped. "That's all now, Blake. Sleep on it tonight, then come see me tomorrow or hit the road."

Terry Blake arose lazily, but his eyes were narrowed and chill. Said he:

"I don't see that it takes any sleeping over, Compton. There's only one thing for me to do—get me a job."

Compton's tight lips relaxed, but he did not smile.

"You're sensible," he said curtly.

"Yes, suh, I reckon so. It happens that I was offered a job today, but I haven't signed on. I guess I'd better go right now and cinch it. Adios, fellas."

Blake turned away, and Compton half arose, his complacent look suddenly erased.

"Hey, you!" he barked. "Wait a minute. Who offered you a job, and what doin?"

THE cowboy turned about, and in the doorway he paused, struck a match and lighted a cigaret. The match fell to the floor and flared up brightly. Blake ground it out with a foot. Then he looked up at John Compton and blew a streamer of smoke straight toward the cattleman's face. There was something supremely insolent in the gesture.

"Yes, suh, I'm taking a job, one that will suit me fine, I think. I'm going to work for Don Guadalupe de Montoya—he is in the sheep business, Compton."

Unhurriedly, Blake strolled across the street. Through the office window Sheriff Thorpe noted the floating spirals of gray - brown dust which followed in his wake; to the sheriff's unwinking gaze that had all the appearance of gun smoke.

When Blake had gone the cattleman stood holding onto the sheriff's desk and quivering in every limb. Seldom had he felt the consuming rage as welled within his bosom now; never had he been so flouted. Thorpe stood watching him in scared, unhelpful silence. Gradually Compton mastered himself and sat down; the flush ebbed from his face, leaving it ashen white and set in cruel, relentless lines. His voice was flat, dead, when he spoke to Thorpe:

"I want to sit here for awhile, Sam. Ride up to my house and bring back my horse; I'm going to the Triangle."

The sheriff slipped out without a word, glad to get away. The cowman leaned back and lighted a cigar, staring up at the ceiling with unseeing eyes . . . the cigar smoldered, went out.

Compton was still sitting there when Thorpe rode up in front of the jail, leading a saddled horse; the rancher went out and mounted, spurred away. The sun had gone down and the prairies were glooming when he reached the Triangle. The crew was washing up in tin basins beside the bunk-shack, having just arrived from the range. Joe Rigsby, the Triangle foreman, hurried up to his employer.

" 'Lo, boss. I wasn't expectin' you out 'til tomorrow. Get down an' I'll take your hawss."

"Never mind, Joe," said Compton. "I'm going right back. I want to give you some instructions, something has come up. Do you remember a man named Keppinger, Dutch Keppinger, who now lives in El Paso? I want him."

Rigsby's head lifted in a startled look.

"Sure I remember him, Compton; he used to work here, you know." Then with the license of long service he added bluntly: "But he's a bad actor, boss; I wouldn't fool aroun' with that lobo, if I was in

your place."

"That'll do, Rigsby," Compton snapped. "I didn't ask your advice. I want you to send a man to Carrizozo tonight to catch the morning stage for El Paso. Instruct him to find Dutch Keppinger if it takes a month and bring him back here. Have him tell Keppinger that I say come, and that there will be triple pay in it for him.

"Send a lead horse to Carrizozo by your man for Keppinger to ride out here." The cattleman paused for a moment, thinking. "Let's see—this is Friday. Allowing a day or two to locate Keppinger in El Paso or Juarez—he will no doubt be gambling in one or the other—they should be back within a week. Tell your man to lose no time. I want Dutch to come straight to the ranch here, then you bring him to my house after dark. Have you got that all straight, Joe?"

"Yes, Compton, it'll be done," said Joe Rigsby.

"All right. Now another thing. Send a rider to Pat O'Hearn at Joneta and another to Captain Tomlison at Pichaco. I want them both at my house in town as soon as they can get here. Have your messengers tell them that I say things have come to a head—they will understand. Do that without fail, Rigsby."

The foreman nodded glumly.

"Yuh'd better stay an' eat before yuh start back, hadn't yuh, boss? Supper's bein' throwed on the table now."

"No, I don't feel hungry, Joe; I'll eat when I get home. I may be out early tomorrow, but I don't know. If I'm not here by nine send Burke Rollins in to see me. Adios."

John Compton rode away. He had been at the Triangle for less than twenty minutes, but in that brief space of time a new chapter in the bloody history of Lincoln county had its start. Joe Rigsby watched his employer's figure until it merged with the gathering dusk. The foreman's look was morose and rebellious; he shook his head as he turned away.

"Dutch Keppinger!" He spat on the ground. "The dirtiest killer in the whole country. I wonder who Compton wants rubbed out now? Damned if I don't feel like quittin'."

JOHN Compton went home to a sleepless night. The red fires of wrath which had ravaged his bosom had somewhat abated, yet they still smouldered persistently. He was quite sincere in his opinion that Blake was a professional gunman; he had swallowed the gambler's story hook, line and sinker, since he saw no reason why Hall should lie about it. But that made the matter all the worse. He believed that all men, particularly gunmen, had a price, and the the astute Don Guadalupe had offered Blake his. Which meant, to Compton's way of thinking, that crafty old Montoya had completed his organization of the sheepmen and had matured his plan of action. And in Blake he now had the able, fearless and unscrupulous leader that he needed, one who would not hesitate at fighting the devil with fire. And that was a new departure for Don Guadalupe; what it might lead to Compton could not guess, but he was sorely apprehensive.

Should Dutch Keppinger come in time Blake would be taken care of in short order—of that Compton had no doubt. But it was by no means certain that the messenger would find Dutch; the gunman might have left El Paso. Hence Compton racked

his brain for an alternative plan, and toward daybreak he had decided upon one. He fell into a fitful slumber, from which he awakened only when a servant rapped upon his door to announce that Burke Rollins was in from the ranch and asking to see his boss.

After leaving the jail Blake ate a hasty lunch then proceeded straight to the Montoya place; he must confer with Don Guadalupe at once. His rap upon the door was answered by a man servant, a young Mexican with a long, blank face and stupid-seeming eyes. The man was arrayed quite neatly in funereal garments, and his jet black hair was plastered down upon his forehead with an oil which gave out a faint, rancid odor. He caused the cowboy to suddenly think of a black-snake.

The servant threw the door wide and stepped obsequiously aside so that the visitor might enter the hall. And at that moment Carmelita came in through a door to the patio. She advanced to meet Blake with undisguised eagerness.

"We are honored, Meester Blake," she said lightly. "Eet ees a nize surprise to have you return so soon."

Blake took her proffered hand; it met his own with a slight, yet unmistakable pressure and the cowboy felt a quick, warming thrill. He said, a little thickly:

"Something has happened, Miss Carmelita, which makes it necessary for me to see Don Guadalupe again; Felipe, too, if he is here."

"Felipe has gone, Meester Blake, but he should return soon. An' Don Guadalupe ees taking a late siesta. But I shall awaken him eef you desire it."

"No, I wouldn't have you do that, Miss Montoya," said Blake. "I'll come back a little later."

As he made to leave Carmelita placed a slim hand upon his arm to detain him; again Blake felt the stirring of his blood.

"Why go at all?" the girl said archly, though her gray eyes were sincere. "Eet weel not be long before mi padre will awaken. Am I, then, such poor companee that you do not wait an' talk weeth me?"

"I would like nothing better, and I will," Terry Blake hastened to say, then emboldened by her manner, he added: "Provided that you will call me Terry after this, Miss Carmelita. I expect to tie up with Don Guadalupe, you know, so I'll almost be one of the family."

Carmelita laughed softly; said she:

"I'd love eet, Terree. An' then, of course, you weel call me Carmelita. Carmelita an' Terree!"

THE last three words were uttered musingly, the girl flushed and continued in haste:

"We will not seet een the patio, eef you pleeze; the sun ees much too bright there now. Come on, Terree."

She led the cowboy into the library. It was a large, cheerful room with a huge fireplace at one end. One side of the room was taken up with book-cases filled with well bound volumes which evidenced much usage. The walls of the library were wainscoated for a distance up and age had imparted to the wood a warm, smoky color. On the wall above a grandfather's clock was a bundle of Indian arrows, a dozen or more. The girl saw Blake glance at them, and informed:

"Those arrows were gathered up at the Casa Verde, mi padres ranch, after an attack by the Indians not so

very long ago. You see, Terree, we have had war before this, well weetheen my own memory." She pointed to a seat upon a couch and sat down beside him. The haughtiness of manner which had been so much in evidence at their prior meetings had now departed; she was but a demure, winsome maid, almost intimate in her behavior. It seemed to Blake that no more than ten minutes had elapsed when Felipe's voice was heard in the hall; it had been, in fact, nearly an hour. Carmelita drew a little away from the cowboy and called to her brother; he came to the door of the library, to pause there abruptly.

"Ah!" The exclamation was rich in significance. "You came back, Terree? Thees ees fin'."

Blake explained to Felipe as he had done to Carmelita and the boy went to summon his father. Carmelita said with composure:

"Felipe, Mr. Blake, ees—w'at you call eet—a born matchmaker? He sees theengs w'at are not. Do not let eet disturb you, Terree."

Blake grinned.

"How come you think it would disturb me, Carmelita? Felipe might be right, at that. Now as far as—"

He broke off as Felipe and Don Guadalupe came into the library together, and Carmelita, knowing that a conference would ensue, dutifully departed. Terry Blake in his usual direct manner went at once to the point.

"I've had a run-in with John Compton, Don Guadalupe. Maybe I let my temper get away from me and said too much, but anyway I don't think that it could have been postponed for more than a day or two."

Whereupon he meticulously repeated the conversation that he had engaged in with the cattleman, omitting only all reference to the imaginary killings with which he had been charged. He ended:

"And so, Don Montoya, it follows that Compton is cooking up something in which he needs professional gunmen. I knew before I went to see him that he thought I was one. What he has in mind I don't just know, but I can make a close guess, I think. Now, suh, I have come to say that if you want me I am with you until the cows come home. Just give me your orders."

Felipe stifled an exultant whoop; his father fluttered an admonishing hand at him.

"Quiet, pleeze, Felipe." to Blake: "That ees good news, Senor Blake, though the word you breeng about John Compton disquiets me; I did not theenk it was so near. However, as you 'ave said, it could not for long have been delayed. Weel you let me theenk for awhile?"

Silence fell like a cloak aver the great room. Felipe fidgeted. Blake was immersed in his own thoughts. After a long period of meditation Don Guadalupe sat up with an air of decision.

"That ees eet, I think," said he quietly, more to himself than to the others. He turned toward the cowboy. "I feel that you mean w'at you say, Senor Blake, so I weel geeve you, not orders, but instructions. First, I would have you ride at once to Fort Sumner an' take letter I shall write to the commandant there. Felipe, who knows the trail well, weel accompany you. Colonel Miller, the commandant, would resent eet should I sen' heem a letter w'ich is not sealed, so I shall acquaint you weeth the contents of the letter, an' explain the situation that now exists,

in advance.

"Eet ees my purpose to ask Colonel Miller to sen' an officer weeth a company of men to Lincoln to investigate the situation here, an' then to remain for awhile to avert a conflict weeth the cattlemen. Thees, I theenk, Colonel Miller will not do, not now at least. You weel get little satisfaction from him, I am sure, for he ees a fren' of John Compton and also the other cattlemen. Miller ees an' hones' man, no doubt, but he has been misled an' sees onlee through the eyes of the cattlemen, our foes. My influence, such as eet ees, does not count for much weeth the military authorities, but weeth the territorial officials. W'at I have een min' ees to establish an alibi een case there should be bloodshed. Ef trouble does come, an' I had not first appealed to Colonel Miller, John Compton would surely claim that we were the aggressors. You understand, Senor?"

"Yes, I do, Don Guadalupe, and it is a very wise precaution," Blake agreed heartily. "I'll be glad to go to Fort Sumner for you and I will see that the alibi is made good. How far is it to the fort and how long should it take for the trip?"

"Eet ees a matter of sixty miles, more or less, an' the way ees hard. But you an' Felipe will ride my horses, w'at are bred for that work. By leavin' here early tomorrow morning, say at t'ree o'clock, you can be in Fort Sumner befo' nightfall, een time to see Colonel Miller at the post. You should not take long weeth heem an' you can start on your return trip w'en you weesh. But I would not lak' for you both to be gone ver' long; no one knows w'at may come up, an' I am ol'.

"Eef eet pleezes you, Senor Blake, I would sugges' that you go now an' get your horse, for you weel want your own saddle, an' w'at else you may want from the hotel, then return here. So that no one may see you leave an' perhaps follow you, you weel dine weeth us an' stay for the night, leavin' your horse een my stable w'en you go. That would be best, I theenk."

"It suits me all right, Don Guadalupe, if it won't be any trouble to you. Then I'll go to the hotel and—"

He broke off at a sudden warning gesture from Felipe. The boy had arisen to his feet silently, and now he whirled about to fling open a door into the hall. The crow-like man servant was kneeling at the entrance, and he was now busily wiping the polished floor with a cloth.

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed Felipe harshly. "I theenk I hear a noise. W'at you do here at thees time of day, Ramon? You try to hear our talk, yes?"

The man servant got to his feet, saying nothing; his face was without expression. He shrugged, displayed the waxed cloth as in explanation, then glided away. Felipe closed the door.

"Don Guadalupe, that man, Ramon, ees onlee a spy for someone, I theenk for John Compton. Yesterday I saw heem w'en I thought he was tryin' to overhear w'at you say to Meester Blake."

"You may be right, Felipe; he should have not been here at thees hour." Don Guadalupe was slightly frowning, but there was not much trace of concern in his manner. "But nothin' has been said here that I would min' John Compton knowin'. That ees—" he added worriedly, "save about the treep to Fort Sumner. However, we weel dismiss Ramon at the week-end; you weel see

to it, Felipe."

Chapter XI

JOHN Compton, with Burke Rollins at his side, rode down to the sheriff's office. Thorpe was there. The rancher was in a black mood and he wasted no time.

"Thorpe, I've got something for you to do and, by God! I want it done quick. I want you to arrest that man Blake; lock him up in a cell and hold him for a week, incommunicado, at that. You sabe?"

The sheriff's face took on an anguished expression.

"But . . . what's Blake done, Compton? What's the charge a'gin him?" he queried.

"Fake a charge, damn it; frame something on him." Compton snarled. "You're the sheriff ain't you? I know that you haven't the guts to make the arrest alone, Thorpe; that's why I brought Rollins in from the ranch to go with you. I want you to deputize him. Now the two of you go over to the Justice of the Peace and Rollins will swear out a warrant against Blake for shooting that gambler the other night; that will do as well as anything. Then you go with Rollins and serve it. And I don't want any back talk about it, Thorpe —those are orders.

Compton stalked out of the office, growling to himself. The sheriff turned an appealing look on Rollins, but he found small comfort there; Rollins' own look was one of dismay. But he, unlike the sheriff, was not without courage of a sort, although he was as treacherous as a serpent and always waited for the breaks. Now, however, he made the best of a bad situation.

"There's nothin' to it, Ben," said he. "We gotta do what Compton says, whether we like it or not. Maybe Blake will come along without any trouble, countin' on ol' Montoya bailin' him out. Let's go."

The sheriff shook his head pessimistically and went. Rollins swore out a warrant, then the sheriff and his posse of one repaired to the Harley House. The independent Sam Hunt, who liked neither the sheriff nor his companion, told them no more than he wanted to. Although he knew that Blake had gone to Don Montoya's hurriedly, his information was that the cowboy had left the hotel and had not been back; where he had gone Hunt had not the slightest idea. He might have gone to the Casa Verde, said he.

Thorpe and Rollins proceeded to the livery stable where they knew the cowboy kept his horse; the information they secured there confirmed that of Sam Hunt—Blake had taken his horse barely an hour before and had ridden off alone. The stable keeper had not noticed in which direction he had gone. Uncertain as to their course, Rollins and Thorpe repaired to Compton's house to report, only to learn that the rancher had just left for the Triangle. By fast riding they overtook their employer two miles from town. Compton's face grew apoplectic when they told him why they had come.

"Why, of all the dam' fools I ever saw you two are the worst!" he raged. "Following me out here to tell me that! Where do you think Blake would go but to the Casa Verde? Where else could he go? Didn't I tell you that Blake has signed up with Montoya? Get to hell out of here and have that fella in the hoosegow tonight, or I'll boot you both over

into Donna Anna county. Now get busy!"

Thorpe and Rollins turned back, intoning their discontent. Said the sheriff, right valiantly:

"Some of these days, Rollins, Compton is goin' too far with me. An' I'm goin—"

"You ain't goin' nowheres, Ben," Rollins interrupted rudely, "except maybe back to sheriffin' in a livery stable. Compton's got us both by the tail with a down-hill pull an' we gotta min' him. But—" he added consolingly, "he's payin' us both a plenty for it."

They spurred their horses into a swift lope, passed by the Montoya place, where even then Blake was sitting in the patio with Felipe and Carmelita, and headed for the Casa Verde, twelve miles out. Arriving there they quizzed the Mexican caporal—no stranger at all had been at the Casa Verde for a week; he had never heard of a man by the name of Blake. No, Felipe had not been out to the Casa Verde since last Wednesday.

The overseer's manner convinced Rollins and Thorpe that he was telling the truth, as he was. Disconsoit was dusk when they reached there. They ate dinner together and Rollins, reluctant to meet his employer right then, and not at all sure that he was not still at the Triangle, bedded down with the sheriff at the jail for the night. But before he fell asleep he thought of something to do early the next morning which might be productive of results.

COMPTON maintained an active spy service under the immediate direction of Rollins; in fact, that was his principal job. As soon as he had breakfasted the next morning Rollins betook himself to a thmble-down jacal in the outskirts of the town, where lived an itinerant vender of tamales. When Rollins had expalined to him the purpose of his visit the Mexican grunted, hung his pail of tamales over a shoulder, and went aimlessly down the street, crying his wares. He wound up at the Montoya home and turned into the grounds. At once a voice hailed him, noisily rebuking; Ramon, the house man, came out and up to him, loudly scolding the vender for his unauthorized entry into the grounds. The tamale man expostulated with equally loud vehemence. But after a moment the two quieted down and conversed briefly in Spanish. Finally Ramon, evidently appeased, bought a quantity of tamales and the vender left.

Burke Rollins was standing in front of the Harley House when the tamale man passed it. A quick glance, a nod of the head, and Rollins followed the peddler into a nearby alley. He emerged a little later, an exultant look on his face. Repairing to the jail he picked up Sheriff Thorpe and togehter they hastened to John Compton's residence.

The cattleman listened patiently to Rollins' story of his and Thorpe's search for Blake the day before, considerably exaggerated. As the tale unfolded his face pictured mixed emotions, anger and chagrin predominating. When Rollins had finished, he said:

"You did good work, Burke. So Blake and young Montoya have gone to Fort Sumner, have they. I don't like it a bit."

"Burke an' me can—" Thorpe began hardily.

"You can shut your grub-trap and let me think." Compton interrupted roughly. "Here, smoke a cigar and

then you can't talk—you, too, Rollins."

He shoved over a bunch of twisted stogies that he reserved for his ranch hands. Then he sank back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head. John Compton was worried. He did not think that the military authorities at the fort would respond to any appeal Montoya might make; he was not worrying about that. For Colonel Miller was his friend, under definite, if intangible, obligations to him. But it had been Compton's intent to dispatch a messenger with a letter to the colonel to forestall any possible intervention by the troops, and now the wily Don Guadalupe had beaten him to the punch, his purpose being, Compton assumed, to establish an alibi. But an alibi for what? What did Montoya have in mind? Did he contemplate taking the offensive himself? What word was Blake taking, and what report would he bring back to his employer? All these things crowded through the cattleman's mind.

John Compton was a dogged, resolute fighter, not yielding an inch under pressure. But he was, and he realized it himself, no strategist; right then he yearned for Tomlison's nimble wits. Damn Tomlison, why wasn't he here. Compton thought on, his look growing more and more perplexed. Then, all at once, he had an inspiration—**Blake must not come back to report.** The cattleman had no more scruples about eliminating a professional killer, such as he believed Blake to be, than he would have had about slaying a rabid coyote. Even then he spat as though to get rid of a bad taste as he abruptly straightened up.

"Well, Thorpe, you had better run along," said he to the sheriff. "Stay close about your office today and keep your eyes open. When Blake shows up again come tell me. We will figure something out then. Blake may get cold feet and pull his freight out of here, not come back from the fort at all. Burke, you stay here; I want to talk to you."

The sheriff reached hastily for his hat, relieved that the interview had been no worse. He did not concur in the cattleman's suggestion that Blake might pull his freight, nor did he believe, somehow, that Compton himself had any faith in it. His boss had something up his sleeve, but as far as Thorpe was concerned he might keep it there.

Compton strode to a window and watched the sheriff climb into the saddle and spur his horse into a lope, then he turned back to Rollins.

"Rollins, I have a scheme worked out, but Thorpe is such a weak sister that I don't want him in on it. Besides, I want to keep his official skirts clean, against a more important need. Pull up your chair and listen to me carefully . . . you've got a chance to do something big for yourself if you're dead game."

TERRY Blake and Felipe were away two hours before dawn, mounted on the two toughest horses Don Guadalupe's stable could provide. Riding fast over prairie and mesa, breasting a mountain range at midday, they arrived at Fort Sumner at five o'clock. Not pausing to eat, or to stable their tired horses, they proceeded to the Post, finding Colonel Miller still in his office. They were promptly admitted to his presence.

The commandant read Don Guadalupe's communication, then read it

again, his countenance slowly darkening. Finally looking up, he regarded Terry Blake and Felipe in turn before speaking, as if he were carefully appraising each. When he spoke he obviously strove to weigh his words with care.

"You, Mr. Blake, and you, Mr. Montoya, are doubtless fully acquainted with the contents of this letter from Don Guadalupe de Montoya, whom, I wish to say here, I hold in the highest esteem. But for your benefit I shall recount the substance of it. Don Montoya advises me that he has reason to apprehend an attack on the Mexican sheepmen of Lincoln county by the white cattlemen, and he requests that I send soldiers. Yet he is not explicit as to what his reasons are. Do either of you know anything other than Don Montoya has stated here which leads you to believe that an attack actually impends? Or of any overt act which has been committed?"

Terry Blake assumed the role of spokesman; he said:

"Not one thing of a definite nature, Colonel Miller — the cattlemen are too smooth for that; they will strike without warning. But it is in the air, no doubt of that. You know, suh, how these things go. But, if you please, Colonel Miller, you are not quite exact in your statement of the situation. It is not the Mexican sheepmen alone who will be attacked, but many American sheepmen who have brought their flocks into Lincoln county of late. Don Montoya speaks for them, as well as his Mexican friends."

Colonel Miller appeared to ponder this. Blake, however, sensed that this was but to impress his audience, that he had already made up his mind. And he had been thinking himself. The commandant sat up with an impatient shrug of his shoulders.

"Please say to Don Guadalupe for me—" said he, "that I understand and sympathize with his disquiet over an unfortunate situation. Yet is impossible for me to comply with his request. There has been so much trouble between the sheep and cattle interests, not alone in Lincoln county, but all over the territory; I have so often sent men of my command on what was later proven to be but a false alarm; and the government has been put to so much expense thereby, that I have the most positive instructions from Washington to move no more troops anywhere unless, and until, actual hostilities have begun. I cannot go behind this order, if I so desired; it allows me no discretionary authority."

COLONEL Miller had spoken gravely and with apparent sincerity. He continued now:

"Please say further to Don Guadalupe that I earnestly hope there will be no trouble, but if there is, and blood is shed, I will dispatch a troop of cavalry to Lincoln the moment I get the word from him. Unhappily that is all I can say to you at present."

Colonel Miller's words meant exactly nothing. He was aware, as were his hearers, that once fighting had started it must be over, one way or the other, long before a courier might reach him and soldiers get back to Lincoln. But Blake affected to believe otherwise; he replied amiably:

"That is good of you, Colonel, and Don Montoya will appreciate your position, I know. In fact, he told me that he had heard a rumor that you had received the instructions from

Washington that you mention. Would you mind answering one way."

"Certainly I will," the colonel said.

"Then suppose the cattlemen do attack the sheepmen. You know, suh, that the sheepmen are within their legal rights in grazing their flocks on free range anywhere—although, in fact, few of them run their sheep on the prairie, but on the hills where the grass is too short to attract many cattle. But should it happen that the sheepmen, American or Mexican, or their flocks are violently assailed by cowmen—or by anyone else, for that matter—**what shall they do about it?**"

Colonel Miller showed his first trace of irritation by a frown; he realized that this red-headed cowboy had artfully maneuvered him into a difficult position. But there was nothing he could do about it. He replied crossly:

"In such case I suppose that there is only one thing they can do—defend themselves to the best of their ability."

Terry Blake's quick grin did not comfort the officer at all.

"Good enough, Colonel, and thank you again. We are both glad to have met you, suh. We'll be going back now. Adios."

Chapter XII

BLAKE and Felipe found an all-night restaurant just without the bounds of the Post; it had a sparsely furnished back room and a stable and feed. Attending first to their horses, they ate a hearty supper, then threw themselves down upon the bed without removing their clothing, for they were dog-tired from their gruelling trip. They left a call for midnight. They slept like logs until that time, when the inn-keeper awakened them. After they each had two cups of muddy black coffee, as potent as aqua fortis, they set out upon the return journey.

They travelled more slowly than they had done in coming, for the horses were more jaded than they were themselves. Just after sun-up they topped the summit of the Tortuga range, and in the distance, looming up hugely against the lifting orb, El Capitan reared its hoary head above the mist of the valley like an aged, but watchful sentinel. Behind it the eastern horizon glowed in a glory of old rose and scarlet, shot with golden arrows of light. The mountain air was keen and invigorating, scented with the pungent aroma of the pines. The chirp of the awakening insect life of the forest came as a soothing lullaby. A covey of blue quail broke cover beneath their horses' feet and was away with a deafening whir of wings.

Felipe choked with sheer delight, then his artistic Latin temperament found the safety valve of speech.

"Terree, eet makes me almos' laugh out loud for to theenk of the way you put eet over on the colonel. Now, eef we fight, we can say he tol' us to, yes?"

"Well, that's what he did tell us," said Blake. "I think it was worse than having an eye tooth pulled to the colonel to say it, but he was square enough to come out with it, all right. Yes, it's a good alibi, and that's what Don Guadalupe wanted."

They rode on, not talking much, for each became busied with his own thoughts. They slid down the steeps to strike the sloping foothills, and now they were riding in single-file along a narrow trail hewn by some

early pioneer through an outcrop of ragged malpai. The cowboy squinted up at the sky and called back to Felipe:

"We are making good time, compañero. When we get through this cut we—"

Then it happened like a bolt from the blue. From the corner of an eye Blake glimpsed a peaked hat lifting above a tall boulder and the glint of the sun on metal. His reaction was purely automatic, and as swift as the stroke of a rattler. He cried:

"Look out, Felipe."

But ere the words were out of his mouth he had thrown himself from the saddle, a Colt in his hand. A rifle whanged, fire streaked from above the rock, a missile sang by where his body had been an instant before. Blake was standing now, his body bent forward on his hips, every muscle as tense with expectancy as the coils of a watch spring. For the barest moment, barely longer than the flicker of an eyelid, a head showed above the boulder once more. It was long enough. Terry Blake's weapon spat fire. From behind the boulder came a choking scream, the figure of a man jerked upright struggling to keep a foothold on the slippery stone, failed, and then plunged down head-first, rolled over and over, and laid still at Blake's feet.

FELIPE, who had been several yards behind his companion, ing cry from Blake, and he, too, was had checked his horse at the warnnow out of the saddle. At the report of the rifle he had run forward, drawing his own weapon. He had seen the head rise above the boulder and Blake's flashing reaction.

"Por Dios!" he said in an awed tone of voice. "That man try to bushwhack you, Terree, an' you get heem the first try. W'at shootin'! Ees he dead, compadre?"

Blake was kneeling beside the man. The ambusher was a swarthy Mexican with high cheek bones and coarse, greasy black hair which hung in matted locks to his shoulders. His lips were drawn back over yellowed teeth in a hideous snarl; his eyes were wide open, filled with venemous hate.

"Yes, he is dead, Felipe," said Blake, "but not from my lead, which only creased him, although I shot to kill. But the bullet stunned him and when he tumbled down the cliff he snapped his neck like a pipestem. Do you know him?"

Felipe bent over for a nearer look.

"W'y yes, I know who he ees. The name I do not remember, but he ees a half-breed Apache w'at hang aroun' Lincoln for maybe two years. He ees bad hombre an' has been een trouble befo'. I'm bet my fiesta sombrero that John Compton hire heem for to waylay you, Terree."

"I doubt it, Felipe," Blake said thoughtfully. "Compton would hardly do that. But somebody most likely did—or he might have been on his lonely, thinking we had money on us. Well, he's paid for it, poor devil."

Blake glanced keenly around, then continued:

"By rights, Felipe we should take the body into town and turn it over to the coroner. If I had actually killed him I'd want to do that. But under the circumstances I don't think that I will—it would only give the sheriff an excuse to slap me in jail, and that's the last thing I want right now. What say we bury the body among these rocks and say nothing about it. It won't matter to the breed."

"That ees jus' w'at I had een min', Terry, he only got w'at was comin' to heem. We leave heem here where Compton wonder w'at has happen to hees killer."

"You can't get Compton out of the picture, eh, Felipe?" said Blake. "Well, you could be right. However, if Compton was behind it he will make a pretty close guess as to what has happened to his man when he doesn't show up. But he won't know for certain, so we'll let him stew in his own juice for awhile."

Blake and Felipe carried the body of the murderous half-breed to the top of the heap of rocks; a dozen cavities which would hold a body opened up before them; they dumped the corpse into one and piled a rubble of stone on top of it. After which they pried a massive boulder over the grave, hiding it completely. Carefully removing all traces of the half-breed's plunge down the cliff-side, they scooped up the blood from the trail and smoothed the place over with their feet. The most skillful tracker could not have told that anything had happened here.

AN hour later Blake and Felipe swung into the well-beaten Carrizozo road and urged their horses into a gallop; the sun was still an hour high when they reached the Montoya home.

"I won't stop now, Felipe," said Blake. "You can tell Don Guadalupe about everything as well as I. We are figuring on getting off early tomorrow morning, you know, and there are a lot of things I must do first. I'll see you manana."

Felipe swallowed his disappointment; he had been mentally rehearsing the dramatic relation of the ambush he proposed making, which would lose much of its effect in the absence of the hero of the narrative. He concurred rather sulkily.

"Ver' well, Terree. I weel tell Don Guadalupe all w'at has happened. An' tomorrow I weel wait for you w'ere we agreed."

When Blake neared the general store he saw the sheriff and another man squatted beneath the wooden hood of the general store; he nodded curtly and passed on. Thorpe and Rollins, for the other man was he, had recognized the cowboy when he first hove in sight. Thorpe spoke, but without enthusiasm:

"There comes Blake, Rollins. Maybe we had better arrest him now."

Rollins did not reply and the sheriff turned his head to look at him. His deputized posseman was following the cowboy with staring eyes, those of a man who has had a sudden shock. Thorpe misread the look. "Why, Rollins is scared!" was his quick thought. And at that the sheriff almost went into a panic, for he had been counting on Rollins to do the heavy work when the arrest was made. Sheriff Thorpe felt like a small child who has suddenly awakened in a pitch-black room. He swallowed twice, then enquired again:

"Had we better try to get Blake now, Rollins?"

Rollins replied this time, mumbling the words hoarsely:

"No, I reckon not, Thorpe. Compton said to let him know when Blake got back an' he would figure out somethin' new. Le'me be now. I don't feel so good. Somethin' I et, I guess." He fell to brooding again.

Blake left his horse at the livery stable and walked over to the hotel. Sam Hunt looked up from his absorption in a thrilling adventure of Deadwood Dick, in a paper cover.

"Galloping ghosts! So you came back, did you? I thought you were on the dodge for keeps."

"Why, Sam?" Blake smiled.

"Well, Sheriff Thorpe and Compton's man Friday, Burke Rollins, were in here day before yesterday asking for you. They seemed so set in their ways that I guessed the sheriff had a warrant for you. Where the hell you been, Terry?"

So Felipe had been right! Compton was behind the bushwhacking stunt. Blake answered the hotel clerk's question absently:

"Oh, I've just been riding around, Sam." Then moved by a sudden impulse, he said: "I just saw the sheriff sitting in front of the store; maybe I had better go see what he wants."

He hitched his guns into place and sauntered out. Sam Hunt followed him with his eyes, scratching his head. Thorpe and the man whom Blake now surmised was Burke Rollins were still on the porch of the store.

"Hello, Thorpe," the cowboy accosted, "Sam Hunt told me that you have been looking for me. Anything important?"

Thorpe squirmed uneasily.

"Wel-l, I wasn't exactly lookin' for you, Blake, but I did drop into the hotel to have a talk with you. Then we found out—"

REALIZING the slip he was about to make, he checked himself suddenly and glanced quickly at Rollins, thereby making the revelation complete. To the cowboy the 'we' and the officer's apprehensive glance at Rollins, offered confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ. From his manner Blake was disposed to acquit Thorpe of complicity in the ambushing plot—then Rollins was the instigator of it, hence in all probability John Compton had given the word.

He spoke carelessly, addressing the sheriff, but with his gaze fixed on the silent Rollins' face. His look was mocking.

"I was out of town, sheriff. I rode over to Fort Sumner, the first time I'd ever been there. It was a tough ride, all right, but I made it without any trouble—that is, except one little thing, **which I fixed up dead easy.**"

Rollins knew what the cowboy meant. Beads of cold sweat stood out upon his forehead; he could feel those jeering gray eyes looking right through him, reading his thoughts, his heart, as a printed page. And he was relieved, passionately grateful to his unfamiliar gods when the tall cowboy continued easily.

"Well, Thorpe, if you haven't anything on your mind I'll ramble along and hit the hay. I'm plenty tired. I'll be seeing you later. So long."

He turned away. After a little the sheriff looked side-long at his companion and opened his mouth to speak. He concluded that he wouldn't. Rollins' manner did not invite conversation. Thorpe got up and followed in the cowboy's wake, and Rollins did not appear to see him leave.

Burke Rollins, right then, was a very unhappy man and he badly needed to think out a problem all his own. For the instructions given him by John Compton had been explicit. Rollins was to take two cowboys from the Triangle with him and under cover of his transparent, but quite legal, appointment as a deputy sheriff, meet Blake on the wild and lonely Fort Sumner trail where there could be no witnesses and under pretense of making an arrest take him

off his guard and slay him then and there. Felipe Montoya was in no event to be harmed—any testimony he might offer in regard to the killing would be negated by that of the Triangle cowboys. So Compton had flatly directed.

Rollins had not fancied the plan, not at all—he, himself, would be the star actor in the arrest, not the cowboys, who would be there only as witnesses. And he didn't think much of the possibility of taking Blake off his guard. So when he had left his boss he proceeded to evolve a better and safer plan. Rollins knew the half-breed Apache for the treacherous, savage murderer that he was. The breed had all the instincts of his Mexican mother, plus the trail-craft of generations of Indian braves. Rollins thought that it would be a simple matter for him to lay an ambuscade in the rugged mountains, one which would not fail. Should the cowboy be disposed of, Burke Rollins reasonsed, Compton would shun any knowledge of the details; he would ask nothing about it. If later he chanced to learn what had actually occurred he might rage, but that would be only for effect; secretly he would be well pleased. Rollins had paid the breed half of his price in advance, promising him the balance when he reported success. Then he had sat down complacently to await the report. Now the plot had backfired with a vengeance. When Compton learned of the miscarriage of his plans, and why, he would be like a wild man. And then . . .

By now Rollins' brain was whirling; the more he thought the worse the outlook became. After a long time he got to his feet, straddled his horse, and started for the Triangle. But when he reached the Palacio, where the lights had just flashed on, he reconsidered and got down from his horse, looping the reins over a post in front. He went in and called for an honest quart of Old Taylor, then betook himself to a corner of the saloon, carrying the bottle with him.

When at the midnight closing time a friendly bartender shook him partially awake, supported him to the street, helped him into the saddle and sent him on the way, Burke Collins did not care a tinker's damn what John Compton might think or do. In fact, as he clung to the saddle pommel his reeling brain began toying with a plot to have a half-breed Apache shoot his employer in the back.

Chapter XIII

THE sun was lifting above the horizon, splashing the mountain heads with a gilt-dipped brush, but the valley below was still heavily shadowed. Lincoln, ever a lie-abed, was just rubbing the sleep from its eyes. Terry Blake, mounted on Redskin, jogged down the silent street, past the Montoya home and across the pebble-bottomed ford of the Rio Bonita. At the branching of the road Felipe Montoya awaited him. They turned their horses east down the canyon, riding at an easy fox-trot. Felipe was filled with news, and could restrain himself no longer.

"Terree, I fin' out something thees mornin'. I go to fire theem servant, Ramon, an' he break down an' confess. He ees sure enough spy. He don' know for whom, he says, but a tamale man comes from time to time to fin' eef Ramon knows anything of w'at we say or do. Thees tamale man came day befo' yesterday an' Ramon tell heem you an' me would go to

Fort Sumner to see Colonel Miller. Me, I'm guess for sure who the tamale man works for—John Compton."

"You are probably right, Felipe," the cowboy agreed, feeling no inclination to mention his meeting with Rollins and the sheriff. "But it doesn't make a lot of difference now. What did your father think of the colonel's message?"

"Eet was w'at he expected, Terree. Don Guadalupe was much pleezed w'en I tell heem how you put eet over on the colonel; heem shake all over from laughin'. But he was mad as hell about theem ambush; he want to do somethin' about eet. But I tell heem you tak' plenty care of eet yourself."

They were well out of the town now. The still air of the valley was redolent with the sweet, heady odor of blooming flowers. The frothing waters of the shallow Bonita glistened whitely through the pea-green willows which fringed the stream's banks. The sloping walls of the canyon were stippled, here and there, with color, as if from a painter's random mixing strokes. El Capitan loomed duskily in the distance. Felipe heaved a sigh.

"By Joe, Terree! Thees won day I'm glad I leeve. Ees not thees a gran' countree? An' now you help save eet for our people. That w'at mak' me feel so good."

"Well, I'll do the best I can, Felipe," Blake returned soberly. "It does seem that there should be room in this great land for everyone and everything, including sheep. What is the name of this man we're going to see?"

"By Joe, never can I theenk of hees name, Terree. He has not been her for long, maybe a month. But hees a good man an' already controls the white sheepmen. He ees too ol' to lead theem though, Don Guadalupe theenks. He leeves two, t'ree miles further on, we'ere the canyon ends. We come to there soon."

They rode slowly on, their stirrups clicking together companionably, Felipe chattering without pause, Blake hardly hearing. Shortly the boy glanced at his companion's sober face with a mischievous smile quirking his own lips. He observed:

"Carmelita, she ask to come weeth us today, but I tol' her thees man's beezness, not for school girls. W'en I say that she tell me to go to hell."

"Oh, I guess she didn't use exactly those words, Felipe,' Blake was amused. "Although she should have. But I'm glad that you didn't let her come."

Felipe's brows shaped into an exaggerated arch.

"You don' like for Carmelita to ride weeth us, Terree?"

Blake's reply was a preoccupied smile; his thoughts were roving, oddly prescient.

THEY rounded a turn in the canyon where it broadened and the tall sidewalls levelled in a gradual slope to the mesa. Upon a flat-topped knoll, well out of reach of the Bonita's spring floods, was a small frame house of unpainted siding. Also a large corral in which a flock of sheep huddled, bleating lustily. A man stood in the doorway of the house, and when he saw the two riders turn up the hill toward him he went into the house, to reappear a moment later with a rifle in the crook of his arm. Felipe laughed.

"Ha! ha! The ol' man forget theem rifle, but not for long."

Felipe hallooed and waved a

hand; the man in the doorway shaded his eyes from the slanting rays of the sun with a hand and scrutinized the newcomers fixedly, then he stood the rifle against a wall and strolled to meet them. It was not until they were face to face that Blake recognized the sheepman as Keith Spaulding—he drew a long breath with a hissing intake.

"Hello, Felipe," Spaulding drawled. "Well, Blake, you get around, don't you?"

Felipe's eyes widened.

"You know won another, yes?"

"We've met before," Spaulding answered guardedly.

"We are old friends, Felipe," Terry Blake went further. "You are dead right about him being a good man—there's no better."

"'Stabueno!" Felipe exclaimed joyously. "Then we are feexed for theem keeps, yes?"

Spaulding chuckled. Blake's eyes were roving about, warm and eager. The sheepman suggested:

"Sally is in the house, Terry. You might as well go on in and shake hands. Felipe and I will set out here and chin-chin—I've got a lot to ask him."

Sally Spaulding had seen Blake through a window; the cowboy found her standing in the middle of the room, still and straight, her hands clenched tightly at her sides, as he remembered her last. Her eyes were twin stars.

"Terry," she whispered.

Blake held out his arms and she came into them straight way, without shyness. Terry Blake did not kiss the girl; he only held her close for long minutes, unspeaking. There was no need for him to longer question his heart, for now he knew that there was no other woman for him. At last he pushed her from him, looking deep into the cornflower eyes. His voice was a murmuring tenderness.

"Sally girl, I've followed a winding trail since I left you, and in the end it led me back to you. I might have known that it would be so. I reckon that there is a top-hand who rides point on all our drives, one that we don't sabe any too well. I am taking no more chances; I'm not leaving you again soon."

"Please don't, not ever, Terry."

Then she offered her lips, and Blake did kiss her, over and over and over. At last Sally freed herself from his embrace, weak and breathless.

"You've been practisin', Terry," she accused, shakily.

SPAULDING and Felipe had ended their talk, and it had been a lengthy one.

"W'y don't Terree come?" Felipe wondered aloud.

"Oh, he'll be along," Spaulding replied. "You see, he and my girl, Sally, know each other purty well; I reckon they had more to talk about than we did."

"Of course," said Felipe uneasily, then he brightened. "Ah! here comes Terree now. You stay a long time, hombre."

"Yeah, I did," Blake admitted, making no explanation. "Has Felipe told you of our plans, Mr. Spaulding?"

Spaulding nodded:

"He told me—I'm settin' in the game."

"Then there's little more to be done now, I reckon," said Blake. "I won't be seeing you again for a day or two, Spaulding. I am going now with Felipe to the Casa Verde, then on to Rudiosa, where Don Montoya's brother, Eduardo, lives. If he falls

in with us—and he will do so—I'll go back to Lincoln tonight and check out. I'll tell the hotel clerk that I will be at the Casa Verde, which is what John Compton will expect.

"But instead I'll go back to Rudiosa and work among the Mexican sheepmen. In the meantime you can be seeing your friends. Bring all that you line up with us to a meeting at Eduardo's store in Rudiosa somewhere about ten o'clock Tuesday night. My idea is to then form the sheepmen into squads, each group under a leader who can get them together on short notice. Don Montoya will see to providing arms for all that haven't weapons already. Felipe will be in Rudiosa until then. We expect to act entirely on the defensive, Spaulding; we will not start trouble. Just the same if we can complete the organization we want to no one else better start it. Is that the way you see it?"

Spaulding did not waste words.

"Precisely. That's been my idea all along. But the ranchers will start something, make no mistake about it. You can count on me being on hand Tuesday."

"Then—" grinned Terry Blake, "you had better turn those darn sheep out to graze and stop their belly-aching, hadn't you?"

"I reckon," rejoined the sheepman. "So long and good huntin'."

Blake and Felipe watched while the herder strolled to the gate of the corral and threw it wide; the sheep came pouring out like water through a bottle-neck, spreading fan-wise in a shuffling trot. Spaulding placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly; from behind the house bounded a magnificent collie, its tail whipping like a wind-blown pennant. Spaulding snapped a finger at the flock.

"Take 'em, Shep."

Instantly the dog was after the flock, circling it, snapping at the heels of the belligerent rams with sharp, joyous barks. Magically, it seemed the wide-straying sheep massed and fell into an orderly procession, heading for their customary range on the rugged hills. Spaulding lifted a hand and went into the house.

"I know w'ere theem sheep graze today, Terree," Felipe observed sagely. "An' cattle cannot fin' feed there for to save their lives. But theem sheep weel get fat."

THE two turned away and rode down the slant of the mesa. Felipe was unwontedly quiet, thinking of Sally Spaulding, and there was a vaguely troubled look upon his face —what would his sister think? But soon the boy's exuberant spirits mounted again and he was as voluble as ever. Just beyond Spaulding's place the gorge ended, its eastern side levelling off to undulating prairie. Felipe reined in his horse and pointed, and Blake saw a large green house a short half-mile away.

"That ees Casa Verde, Terree. A gran' ol' house. Eet has been ours for a long, long time."

Which was true. The Casa Verde had been Don Guadalupe's ranch home for more than sixty years. It had been originally a cattle spread, but with Montoya's waning fortunes it had gradually fallen into disrepair. When the don's failing health had compelled him to retire from the active management of the ranch he had sold his remaining cattle and turned to sheep, leaving his flocks in charge of a caporal, a relative of his. Lately Felipe had been assuming more and more the direction of the

sheep ranch, riding out to the casa almost every day.

"We weel go on up, Terree," Felipe said. "I want ver' much to show you through theem house."

They mounted the steep rise, then rode on to halt beside the green house. It was a squat one story adobe, covering almost an acre of ground, its walls forming a hollow square encircling a tremendous patio. It stood upon a level plain, purposely bare of trees or shrubbery which might afford cover to an attacking force. And for the same reason the out-buildings and barns were some distance removed.

Originally the plastered exterior of the casa had been tinted a brilliant green, which had given the house its name, but now the color was faded and dingy, almost an olive hue. There were but two entrances to the building, front and rear. The walls were massive, the windows narrow and deeply recessed, more like embrasures. Which in truth they were, having been designed to withstand the onslaughts of marauding Indians.

Blake sat his horse in silence, studying the green house with critical, searching scrutiny, for it figured largely in his plans. At last he smiled grimly.

"I am not an expert, Felipe but it'll do for me. The casa is a regular fort."

The boy laughed delightedly.

"For sure eet ees. You see theem place lak' pock marks, Terree? Theem all from bandido bullets — Indian, Mexican, Greengo, all kin'. Casa Verde has seen some hot time, I'm tell you. Come, we weel go een. I want for you to meet my cousin, Pablo, an' hees wife, Rosalia. Pablo ees een charge here."

Felipe's cousin, Pablo, was a tall raw-boned Mexican, of tremendous physical strength. His skin was several shades darker than Felipe's. His wife, Rosalia, who came from somewhere in the back part of the house at Felipe's call, was the direct opposite of her husband, a small dumpling of a woman, serene and smiling. Her skin was almost white; her eyes were soft and filled with kindness.

Felipe took Pablo fully into his confidence. He informed him of all that had occurred; of the trip to Fort Sumner and the response of Colonel Miller to Don Guadalupe's request. Then he advised his cousin of the plans that were being formulated. Felipe ended:

"Don Guadalupe has chosen Meester Blake to direct matters for heem, Pablo. For that reason he weel make thees house hees home for the time. You weel, of course, obey heem een all that he may ask of you. Don Guadalupe weeshes that."

Pablo was a man of few words. Said he:

"Eet ees muy buen, Felipe. Long have I waited for thees." He turned to Blake. "The casa ees your own, Senor Blake. Tell me w'at you want."

BLAKE and Felipe remained at the casa but a few minutes . . . they mounted and pushed over the broken mesa to the hamlet of Rudiosa, where Don Guadalupe's younger brother kept a store. Eduardo de Montoya was a much smaller man than the don, but with the same patrician air and courtly manner. He shook hands with the Texas cowboy and listened gravely to Felipe's lengthy exposition of the situation and of Blake's tentative plans for defense. He was particularly interested in Felipe's account of the interview with

the commandant at Fort Sumner. Eduardo de Montoya had been educated at a college on the Pacific coast; his English was almost perfect.

"I am glad that you did that, Senor Blake," he said warmly. "For if the cattlemen do start trouble it will be greatly in our favor." Eduardo shrugged. "And they will start it, mos' certain. I have had information from sources of my own that is not reassuring. I do not like this constant strife with men who should be our friends, Senor Blake, but the sheepmen are long suffering. It is evident to me that to live at all they mus' protect themselves from depredation, and mus' prepare to do so. I am willing to assist with all my resources and all my might. You have but to tell me how."

"That's encouraging, Mr. Montoya," Blake responded. "You are right when you say that the sheepmen must prepare—and that is what we are trying to bring about. What I would like for you to do first is to get in touch with as many of the most reliable of sheepmen among the Mexican people as you can and have them meet at your store next Tuesday night. A friend of mine and Felipes' will get the American sheepmen together and bring them over and then we can all get together on a plan of action. Ten o'clock Tuesday night is the hour we have set. I am going now to Lincoln with Felipe. I'll check out at the Harley House and come straight back here to form some plans with you if you can put me up until Tuesday."

"Of course, I can do that, Mr. Blake," Montoya assured. "It will be a great pleasure to me. Meanwhile I will see my friends and arrange for them to be here tomorrow to talk to you also. Vaya con Dios, amigo."

Chapter XIV

TERRY Blake came down into the lobby of the Harley House with his war bag over an arm. He handed the clerk a twenty dollar bill.

"I'm leaving you today, Sam," he said. "Take out what I owe."

"Leaving? You call that a square deal when I had clean sheets put on your bed less than a week ago?" Sam remonstrated.

Blake laughed.

"It doesn't look right, I know, but I have to; I've got me a job."

"Oh, well that's fine." Sam Hunt spoke sincerely, for he had formed a strong liking for the Texas cowboy. "Who are you going to ride for —John Compton?"

"Uh-uh, for Don Guadalupe de Montoya," Blake told him. "I'll be out at the Casa Verde, Sam, if anyone asks."

The hotel clerk paused in the act of making change and stared at the cowboy. Then he reached a hand across the counter.

"Good-bye, Terry, if I never see you again."

Blake chuckled and pocketed his change. He went to a nearby hardware store, carrying his saddle bags; when he came away the bags were stuffed with rifle and six-gun cartridges. He straddled Redskin and rode out of town.

The dust had hardly settled behind him when a man rode into Lincoln from the other direction. He was astride a lean, gaunted horse, streaked with dried lather. The stranger got down from his mount, hitched it at a rack, and looked enquiringly about him. Noting the sign of the Harley House he crossed over

and went in. Sam Hunt dipped a pen into an ink well and shoved over the dog-eared register.

"I'm not signing on yet," the new arrival demurred. "I want to locate a friend of mine first; maybe you have heard of him—his name is Blake, Terry Blake."

Sam Hunt looked the man over carefully before he gave any information; he decided that there could be no harm in this honest - faced young cowboy.

"Yes, I know Blake," said he. "If you had been here an hour ago you might have eaten breakfast with him; he has been stopping here. But he just checked out. Blake has a job on the Casa Verde ranch, about twelve miles out. He just left for there and if you hurry you may catch up with him."

"There isn't any hurry left in that cayuse of mine," the cowboy said wearily. "Or in me either, for that matter. Doggone that sorrel-top, anyhow. I've been chasing him all over New Mexico for a month and he's always one jump ahead of me. I'll take a room and sleep for awhile and go out to the Casa Verde when it's cooler. Tell me how to get there, pardner."

"You go straight out this road until it forks, then you take the left branch up the canyon until you come to its mouth—it's a big green house up on the mesa to your left; you can't miss it." Sam glanced quickly at the register. "Go on up and take number six, Mr. Rand; the door is not locked. Do you want to leave a call?"

"Oh, I'll wake up in time," said Bob Rand, turning toward the street door. "I'll be back as soon as I take my bronc to a stable for a feed and rub-down. Thanks for the info."

FELIPE came into the patio of his father's house, yawning widely. Carmelita was seated there drying her hair, which she had just washed.

"What time did you get een, Felipe?" she asked. "And w'y are you so lazy? Do you know that eet ees after midday?"

"Me, I'm up almos' all night, Carmelita." Felipe yawned again. "I'm not mak' much noise w'en I come, for fear I'm awaken Don Guadalupe. Then I go queeck to sleep an' jus' wake up." He continued importantly: "An' I sleep much too long, for there ees much I mus' do, muchacha. I'm go at once to the Casa."

"Terree Blake? He ees at the Casa?" Carmelita looked everywhere but at her brother. Felipe frowned blackly.

"Terree Blake? That dam' greengo? No, heem gone to El Paso; heem get scared an' run away. You do not know that?"

Carmelita's small brown hand crept to her bosom.

"Oh! No, I had not heard, Felipe."

The dull lifelessness of his sister's voice smote Felipe with quick compunction.

"Forgive me, seester; I'm won beeg liar. Terree Blake ees not gone; w'er he ees I may not tell even you, for eet has been so agreed. You weel see heem soon, for sure. But—" he added absently, "I'm theenk that maybe Terree has foun' hees girl."

Carmelita's head flung up; a pulse throbbed visibly in her throat.

"W'at ees that you say, Felipe?"

Too late, Felipe saw that he had been indiscreet; he delayed his reply. But as zealous as he was in his attempted match-making for his bueno amigo, Terry Blake, he now realized with a wisdom beyond his years that

if Carmelita was falling in love with the Texas cowboy, as he believed that she was doing, and was doomed to disappointment, the earlier she discovered the fact the less painful it would be for her. Hence finally he answered fully and honestly.

"W'at I say, mi chiquita, ees that Terree Blake has maybeso foun' hees querida. Eet happens that the man Spauldin', w'at we go to see yesterday—heem who has a sheep ranch across from Casa Verde—ees ol' fren' of Terree. An' Spauldin' has a daughter, Sallee, won muy bonita muchacha. Terree go queeck into the house for to see her an' stay a long time. W'en he come out he don' have much to say; heem ver' quiet. Me, I'm not know for sure, Carmelita, but I'm theenk there ees somethin' between theem."

Felipe glanced covertly at his sister, and was dismayed at the emotions her countenance pictured; he changed the subject hastily.

"I'm hongree, Carmelita, an' Dolores tak' siesta. Weel you feex me somethin' to eat, lak' a good girl: maybeso a cup of chocalat'?"

Carmelita made no reply, but she arose and with averted face went into the kitchen. Presently she returned with a substantial lunch, which she placed before her brother. Her face was serene.

"Now eat all this, hungry peeg, and go your way," she said placidly.

Felipe grinned his relief.

HAD Felipe looked back on his way to the Casa Verde much sorrow might have been averted, for he would have seen his sister following him. Hardly had he finished saddling his horse when Carmelita appeared, dressed for riding. She saddled her own mount, went down the canyon behind him, riding rapidly. But when upon rounding a bend she saw Felipe a few hundred yards ahead of her, she rode into the brush beside the way and waited until he was out of sight. So Felipe did not see her.

Kieth Spaulding was in the corral attending to some lambing ewes when he heard the thud of approaching hooves, and he got hastily to his feet, alive to all possible peril. But the rider turning up the rise, he saw, was a woman and the sheepman's tension relaxed. The woman did not glance his way, but rode straight to the door of the cabin. Spaulding had never seen Carmelita de Montoya, but somehow he thought that this was she; he stood thoughtfully watching while the visitor rapped upon the door. The door opened and Sally appeared; the two entered the cabin, closing the door behind them. Spaulding wagged his shaggy head doubtfully, and went back to work.

Carmelita, her impatient wrath spurring her on, lost no time.

"I am Carmelita de Montoya, said she, "An' you are Miss Sally Spaulding, yes?"

"Yes, I am Sally Spaulding, Miss Montoya. I am so very glad to make your acquaintance. I know your brother, Felipe, and Terry Blake was speaking of you to me only a day or so ago."

Sally extended her hand with a smile. She could have said nothing more irritating to her visitor. Her outstretched hand was ignored, and disturbed at the other's manner she let it fall to her side. She was on guard now.

"Is there anything wrong, Miss Montoya?" she queried.

"That ees what I have come to fin' out." Carmelita's voice was cold.

"So you are a fren' of Terree Blake, yes?"

"I have known him for some time, Miss Montoya." Sally was troubled now, and a trifle stiff. "Is—has anything happened to Terry?"

"No, nothin' has happened to heem—that I know of. I would ask you frankly, Miss Spauldin', eef you are more than a fren' of Mr. Blake."

Sally's pointed chin tilted haughtily.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

Carmelita laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Oh, I do not mean w'at you think, that there ees anything so ver' bad. Onlee I would like to know eef you expect, perhaps, to wed with Mr. Blake?"

At the effrontery Sally Spaulding gasped; her blue eyes flamed. Yet she controlled herself while she reflectd. That these were times of deadly peril she knew; she was aware of Terry Blake's alliance with Don Guadalupe de Montoya. There was something behind the intrusive question which she could not fathom. This girl—a lovely one, she admitted to herself—might have ample reason for asking it. So finally she replied with simple dignity:

"Terry Blake has asked me to marry him, Miss Montoya."

Carmelita started; her lovely lips twisted in a bitter grimace. Yet, consummate actress, as most women of the Spanish race are, she widened her eyes in a look of innocent bewilderment. She enquired artlessly:

"But how can eet be, Miss Spauldin', that Terree Blake has asked both of us to be hees wife? You are quite sure of w'at you say, then?"

The color drained from Sally Spaulding's face; her hands clenched into fists which sank the nails deep into the flesh of her palms.

"He—has asked you —to be his wife?"

THE answering shrug of Carmelita's shoulders was more expressive than words. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then placed both hands over her face, choked back a sob which was purposely audible, and turned and ran toward her horse. She mounted and fled down the slant to the Lincoln road at perilous speed. But when out of hearing of the house her laughter jangled stridently, in near hysteria. Sally found her way to a chair and sat down. For a full twenty minutes she remained motionless, not weeping, but staring with dry, unseeing eyes out a window. After a time her limbs ceased their quivering, the color ebbed back into her face and her breathing became less labored. She arose and went out to the corral where her father was at work and addressed him with complete composure:

"That was Carmelita Montoya, Pa. She told me something that makes it necessary for me to see Terry at once. You are going to meet him at Rudiosa on Tuesday, aren't you? I want to go with you."

Spaulding, cannily, asked no questions. But he did offer a half-protest.

"It's a long, hard ride, Sally, especially at night."

"Yes, I know. But I have taken hard rides by your side before this, Pa. This is important to me."

Spaulding yielded quietly.

"All right, Sally. We had better leave a little early, then—say right after dark, so that you will have time to see Blake before our meeting."

Carmelita rode swiftly back to Lincoln, punishing her spirited mare

with the tiny rowels of her spurs until its flanks dripped red. There is no anger so devastating, so blind and unreasoning, as that of a jealous woman. Carmelita's jealousy was augmented because of her surprise at finding Sally Spaulding a worthy rival, equal in every respect save that of classic beauty, to herself. With each leap of her harrassed steed her rancor increased until, when she reached her home, she was possessed of a wanton, vengeful spirit of evil.

At the gate of her home she drew rein mechanically, but after a moment of thought she rode sedately on down the street, stopping in front of the Harley House. She dismounted, hitched her horse and entered the lobby. It was deserted, save that Sam Hunt was behind the counter as usual. At one end of the lobby were two writing desks for the convenience of patrons, and equally as available to favored residents of the town. Carmelita waved her hand at the clerk.

" 'Ullo, Sam. I would write a few words, if you don' min'."

"I mind, all right, Carmelita," said Sam. "I thought that you had dropped in to make talk with me. But go ahead; if there's not enough paper sing out and I'll bring some."

Carmelita smiled at him.

"W'en I mak' talk weeth you, Sam, I prefer that eet be een the moonlight. There ees sufficient paper, thank you."

Sam preened himself. Carmelita removed her gloves and selected a stub pen of a kind she never used. Then, writing backhand to disguise a distinctive convent-patterned scroll, she scribbled across a sheet:

"The man Spaulding, who lives in the S o u t h w e l l place across from the Casa Verde, is plotting against the cattlemen."

THAT was all. Only a few words, but which were to cost precious lives. Carmelita sealed the sheet in an envelope and directed it to John Compton. She smiled at Sam Hunt again, walked to the postoffice to purchase a stamp, and dropped the envelope into the letter box. She rode home slowly, sagging in the saddle. Old Dolores stared fixedly at the girl's face when she entered the house.

"W'ere 'ave you been, Carmelita? An' w'at ees wrong weeth you, mi chiquita?"

Carmelita shook her head silently in reply. She proceeded to her room, closed the door behind her and bolted it. Then she flung herself face-down upon a bed, already in the throes of a hateful, poignant remorse. Frantically, she pounded the pillow with her clenched fists. She moaned aloud:

"Oh-h! To theenk that I, Carmelita de Montoya, should be so vile. **Madre de Dios!**"

Anguished sobs racked her slender frame. Dolores heard and came to the door, listened, rapped upon it, waited patiently. After a brief time Carmelita cracked it open—Dolores pushed her way into the room. She took the girl into her arms.

"Now cry, little one," she said in Spanish.

Felipe had ridden slowly down the canyon, headed for the Casa Verde. But after passing the Spaulding place, where he saw the sheepman at work in his corral, he speeded up. He was whistling blithely. He swung around a bend and then he saw, at a distance ahead of him, another horseman, dressed in cowboy rig. Felipe slowed down, for he had

grown cautious of late; still he gained upon the other man. When he was nearer the rider ahead heard the sound of Felipe's approach and turned in his saddle. Then he reined his horse to a standstill, waiting. Felipe proceeded, but slowly, one hand upon the butt of his pistol. But when he noted that the other was a stranger, a good-looking youth nor much older than himself, he relaxed.

"Ullo, compadre! You wait for me?"

The stranger's face wreathed in a quick grin; one so intriguing that it won straight to Felipe's susceptible heart. Said he:

"Uh-huh. You see, I'm a lost cowpuncher. I'm a total stranger about here and I'm trying to locate a place called the Casa Verde; it ought to be around here somewhere, but damned if I know just where—I thought that maybe you could tell me."

Felipe tightened up again.

"Yes, I know w'ere the Casa Verde ees. You have some beezness there, maybe?"

"No, I haven't any business in particular, but an old side-kick of mine is supposed to be at the Casa Verde. His name is Terry Blake; I used to ride with him in Texas."

Felipe's teeth flashed in a gleeful smile.

"Well, I be dam'! I'm bet ten dollar I can tell w'at your name ees first try—eet ees Bob Ran'."

"You called the turn, all right," Rand said. "Then of course you know Blake."

"Know heem! We are jus' lak' that." Felipe hooked his two forefingers together. Then he reached a hand out to Rand. "Shake, Bob. Terree tell me all about you. Onlee las' night he say hees goin' to write you to come out. Me, I'm Felipe Montoya, an' my padre own the Casa Verde; I'm go there now. Come weeth me."

Bob Rand fell in beside him; the two boys went on, chatting with the easy familiarity of friends of long standing. They swung out of the canyon and Felipe pointed.

"There ees Casa Verde, Bob, jus' w'ere eet has been for seexty years. Terree ees not there now. I'm go back to Lincoln tonight an' tomorrow I go to Rudiosa w'ere Blake an' I have some beezness. W'en we feenish we come straight here, Tuesday night or Wednesday mornin'. Until then the casa ees your home. By Joe! Terree weel be glad to see you."

They rode up the hill. Bob Rand saw a large, swarthy man, of middle age and unsmiling, in the corral. He wore a tall steeple hat of straw. He came to meet them and Felipe hailed:

"Ho, Pablo! Como le va."

"Ola, Felipe; eet ees you, then."

"Mos' certain. Pablo, I would have you know thees hombre, Bob Ran'. He ees amigo of Terree Blake, also my fren'. Bob, Pablo ees a cousin of mine, an' ees the boss here."

Bob Rand shook hands with the saturnine Pablo.

"An' now, Pablo—" Felipe resumed, "Senor Ran' weel stay here until Terree Blake returns. You weel, of course, be good to heem; jus' lak' Casa Verde hees own. Comprende?"

Pablo shrugged his powerful shoulders.

"Seguro, Felipe. Buy w'y tell me that, muchacho? Am I, then, un rustico."

CHAPTER XV

IN accordance with his employer's instructions Joe Rigsby had dis-

patched the couriers to O'Hearn and Tomlison promptly. The one to the Scissors had found O'Hearn absent, in Las Vegas. The messenger left the word he had brought and started on his return trip. The one to Tomlison happened to be Bruce McFarland, and he had better luck, finding Captain Tomlison at home. After receiving John Compton's imperative summons Tomlison stood thinking it over for some time, then he enquired:

"Has anything unusual occurred in Lincoln, McFarland?"

"Nothing that I have heard of, Captain. There was a little shooting scrape in the Palace a few nights ago, but it didn't amount to much."

"Tell me about it," Tomlison bade.

McFarland told him of Blake's affair with the gambler, making light of the matter and mentioning no names. The rancher listened in silence, mentally seeking a connection with the subject matter of his last conversation with Compton and O'Hearn. He spoke musingly:

"That would hardly get Compton stirred up, even if he was sitting in the game. Yet something evidently has. Compton hasn't had any trouble about sheep, or with old Montoya, has he?"

McFarland's young face hardened, for he was fully in Felipe's confidence.

"If he has, I haven't heard about it, Captain Tomlison. Was he expecting any?"

Tomlison chose to ignore the question.

"Well, tell Compton that I will be in tomorrow or the next day unless something unforeseen comes up here. Go into the mess-shack, Mac, and get a snack before you start back; some of the boys are still in there."

Bruce McFarland was young in years, but his firm jaw and steady eyes lent him an air of greater maturity. His father was the wealthy owner of the Triple X cattle ranch, across the New Mexico line in Texas. Bruce was an only child and had been given an education much superior to that of the average stockman. When he had returned from school the year before he had fallen wholeheartedly into the work of the big Triple X spread. Three months before this he had set out on a round of the country to study cattle conditions in other sections, in order to better equip himself to succeed his father.

Arriving at Lincoln he had met young Montoya, and through Felipe, Carmelita. Right then McFarland's rovings ceased. The instantaneous mutual attraction that he and the girl felt ripened quickly on the part of Bruce into love—and he thought that Carmelita bade fair to return it. McFarland secured a job on the Triangle and had stayed; almost every night that he could get away from the ranch he spent at the Montoya home.

Slouched hip-shot in his saddle, McFarland rode the twenty miles back to the Triangle buried in morose thought. When he arrived at the ranch he left the horse he was riding, which chanced to be his own, standing saddled, and hunted up the foreman.

He found Joe Rigsby squatted in a pen applying sheep-dip to a worm-infested cut on a hog-tied calf. Rigsby looked up from his task.

"Back already, Mac? You made good time. Find Tomlison at home?"

"Yes. He is coming in tomorrow or the next day." McFarland squared

his shoulders. "What's up, Rig? Tomlison asked me if Compton had had trouble about sheep, or with Don Guadalupe de Montoya. I want to know what's in the wind."

The foreman carefully placed the pot of ointment out of the reach of the calf's thrashing feet; he stood up and looked at McFarland quizzically, then turned his gaze away, over the browning range.

"Grass crisping early this year, ain't it, Mac?"

Young McFarland chewed his lip while he pondered for a moment, then he said:

"All right, Rigsby; that tells me enough. I am off the Triangle payroll—you can leave my time with Sam Hunt at the Harley House when you come in. My saddle is on my own horse; I'll go into the bunkshack and get my belongings and shove off. So long, Rig; the best of luck to you."

Joe Rigsby watched him out of sight—he turned to the now quite motionless calf and kicked it in the ribs.

"Lay still, you dam' droppin' of satan!"

AN hour later Bruce McFarland, after registering at the Harley House, turned his horse into the path which led to the Montoya well. He dismounted beside it, left his horse with dangling reins beneath the apple tree, and reached for the oaken bucket. When he had drunk his fill he hailed the house.

"Ho, Felipe! Carmelita! Come a running; you have a recruit."

Captain Tomlison reached Lincoln at noon on Monday—at about the time Bob Rand rode out of town on his way to the casa. He was now closeted with Compton in the Sheriff's office at the jail and they were alone, for Sheriff Thorpe sat in the broiling hot sun on the jail steps to keep unwelcome visitors at a distance. He had an avid ear cocked toward an office window at his elbow, which was part-way open. Thorpe could not hear all that was said, but what he did hear was highly interesting—and more highly disturbing.

Compton's words were quite audible now, for although they were low-pitched they carried to the sheriff by reason of their passionate intensity, for the word that Terry Blake had escaped the trap which he had set for him and, moreover, had hinted that the agent of death would not show up again, had crystallized his murderous resolve into adamantine determination. Now Thorpe heard:

"You are only wasting your breath, Tomlison — **Blake must die.** I'll kill him personally, if I have to. By God! when did you get so finicky about squashing a rattler that crossed your path?"

By straining his hearing to its utmost receptivity the sheriff succeeded in catching Tomlison's reply:

"I am not finicky, John; I'm only careful. I agree that the man must be disposed of, but I don't like your proposed method, not one bit. To have Blake slain by a notorious gunman, one who everyone knows is for hire, is too obvious and may bring about an investigation which would be disastrous at this time."

"Investigation, bosh!" Compton snorted. "Blake's a killer himself, as much as Dutch Keppinger is. He has murdered God knows how many men. Who is going to do any investigatin' but the sheriff of Lincoln county? Why do you think I carry Thorpe on my pay roll? If there is any investigatin' done, he will do it.

And I'll write the report that Thorpe will make to the authorities myself, and if they don't like it they can take it out on Thorpe."

Sheriff Thorpe, sweltering beneath the rays of the perfervid sun, suddenly went cold all over. Tomlison was silent for a time, pondering his companion's words. Then he asked:

"When is your man Keppinger due here?"

"He is here now—Rigsby sent me word," said Compton. Keppinger will be at my house tonight. It's the only way, Tomlison, Blake must be rubbed out or we are finished. In the week or so that he's been here he's been as busy as a coyote with fleas. Blake is as smooth a hombre as I've ever met up with, all nerve and chain lightning with a six-gun. There is not a man on our payroll who would have a chance with him in a stand-up fight—and that is what it must be—or appear to be, anyway. However, Dutch can handle him, you can be sure of that. Then when the sheepmen find themselves without a leader we—you, O'Hearn and I—will strike quick and hard. I have figured out just how, Tomlison, and I am only waiting for Pat O'Hearn to get here with a few of his men. I am—pull your chair up closer, Tomlison."

The sheriff could hear nothing after that, but he felt that he didn't want to anyway. He started to roll a cigaret, but his fingers were shaking so that he spoiled several brown wrappers before he fashioned one.

JOE Rigsby was no physiognomist, but anyone seeing his face as he covertly studied the countenance of the horseman beside him when they rode into Lincoln late that evening might well have thought so. Joe's glance would linger, fascinated, to jerk away whenever his companion turned his head.

There was nothing basilisk about the other man's face, at that. The single feature which might have drawn a second glance was the eyes, which at first view appeared to be pupilless and wholly void of expression, as a reptile's eyes are. They were neither blue, brown or gray, none of the usual colors. Perhaps the most accurate simile which might be used would be to say that they were the eyes of a dead mackerel, many times multiplied. The likeness was accentuated by lashes which were so colorless as to seem nonexistent. Whenever those eyes turned on Joe Rigsby he fervently wished that he was somewhere else.

The owner of the eyes was Dutch Keppinger. He was of unguessable age, of medium height and weight, though a trifle inclined to fatness. He did not have much hair, and what he did have was as nonassertive as his brows and lashes. But for one thing he might have been passed up as a human nonentity—that was his reputation, which every person west of the Pecos knew; and which Joe Rigsby knew was well deserved. And that was the reason for Rigsby's perturbation.

Keppinger, Rigsby knew, was a cold blooded, inhuman killer; a slayer of his fellow men at a price. He slew equally without animosity or compunction; without any sensation at all save the professional pride in his work with which a good carpenter drives a nail straight. It had been related of him that he had checked out his nearest friend, but in that case had demanded higher than union wages.

Keppinger was square with his

employers; he did as he was told and asked no questions—nor did he ever fail. Since he had ridden up to the Triangle alone—the puncher who had been sent for him having tarried in Carrizozo, feeling that he had well earned a drunk—Dutch had not uttered a dozen words. He had grunted upon his arrival and had grunted again when informed by Rigsby that he was to proceed to Lincoln after dark; that was all. His sole manifestation of feeling was that from time to time he caressed the two Colts at his hips almost reverently, as if in silent communion with his personal deity. Little wonder that Joe Rigsby's stare was a glassy one.

John Compton had been hobnobbing with professional gunmen for so long that he knew all the various species, and how to deal with each. He wasted no words on Keppinger.

"The man I want, Dutch, is a Texas cowboy by name of Blake." said he. "He's at the Casa Verde now, the only white man about the place. He's a young fella, maybe twenty-five, tall and slim, and has reddish hair. He's from Amarillo and is fast with a six-gun—make no mistake about that. I don't care how or where you do your job, provided it is finished by this time tomorrow. It is too late today." Compton produced a roll of currency held together by a rubber band. "There's three hundred in this roll; it's yours when you say you'll take on the job. There will be three hundred more waiting for you when you report that the job is finished. How about it?"

Keppinger didn't waste any words either; he said:

"Gi'me," and reached for the money.

BOB Rand had the happy faculty of making friends quickly. In the brief time that he had been at the Casa Verde he had completely won over the taciturn Pablo. When Felipe had finished his business with the caporal the three had sat in the shaded patio for an hour, discussing the differences of the cattlemen and the sheepmen fully. For Felipe, counting Bob Rand as a willing and welcome ally, held nothing back. Rand had said simply that any fight Terry Blake had on his hands was his fight, too.

It was dusk when Felipe left for Lincoln, and after eating a hearty dinner prepared by Rosalia, Rand had gone to bed fired with a high resolve. He would side Terry through this war and when it was over he would settle down in this beautiful country, perhaps go into business with Terry. And by golly! they would raise sheep. Rand admitted to himself that he would prefer the longhorns, but if Terry—he fell asleep before he got any further.

Pablo called him early.

"Senor Ran'—" the caporal said at breakfast, "today I mak' the round of our sheep camps." Pablo swept his arm in a wide circle in illustration. "Maybe eighteen, twenty mile pasear. You theenk you would lak' to ride that far weeth me."

"I'll say I would," Rand eagerly replied. "If I am going to adopt sheep myself I'd better find out something about them. I'll be ready in two minutes, Pablo."

Pablo led off toward the mountains, for Don Montoya recognized the justice of the cattlemen's chief objection to sheep and grazed his flocks on the stony uplands where the knife-like hooves of the woolies would do the smallest possible dam-

age. Perhaps if others had been as considerate the friction would have been lessened.

After a time they came to a flock of sheep under the eyes of a watchful shepherd and his still more watchful dog. Then another, and another, and still more until Bob Rand asked himself if indeed there was any space for cattle left. Then his gaze roamed out over the miles of grassland, stretching like a limitless sea to the horizon, and he smiled at his mental question.

The sun was lowering behind the Tres Cerros peaks when they came back to the casa, Pablo having paused at each flock for a few words in Spanish with the herder; that he was imparting news which sparked new fires in their dulled eyes, Rand saw.

As the two rode up to the casa Pablo and Rand saw a man watching their approach from his perch upon the top rail of the corral. He climbed down now and Pablo slowed his horse to a walk.

"I know theem hombre, Senor Bob. Hees name ees Keppinger, an' he ees a muy malo lobo. I theenk he has come to mak' trouble for Terree Blake."

Bob Rand's blood coursed hotly —this is where he would chip into the game, even before he and Terry had met.

"You keep quiet, Pablo," said he. "Let me do the talking. We won't tell him anything about Terry, nor anything else, if he asks."

Rand squinted at his holster—his Colt was hanging all right. The two rode on, quickening their gate; they turned into the corral and dismounted. The stranger loafed toward them, ignoring Pablo, to halt in front of Rand. A bare six feet separated them. Keppinger was slouching with his left hand in his trouser's pocket; the thumb of the right was hooked negligently in his belt. His gaze studied Rand's whitened face, fell to the gun strapped at his side, became fixed. Rand had felt a sudden chill when the reptilian eyes had met his own.

"Your name's Blake?"

There was little rising inflection; it was more a statement of a fact than a question. Rand said evenly:

"I don't tell my name to every nosey gent who asks, fella. Not that Blake isn't a good enough one. What do you want, hombre?"

Keppinger did not look up even then; he spoke mildly, to himself more than to Rand.

"I guess you're Blake, all right. **Pull your gun!**"

TOO late, Bob Rand sensed that he was doomed; he grabbed awkwardly for his weapon. Dutch Keppinger's r i g h t hand barely moved; it but twisted down and backward with a movement of the wrist until the fingers curved about the butt of a six-gun reposing in an oddly shaped holster. The weapon did not come out . . . the holster tilted up instead, turning upon a swivel which suspended it . . . it's open tip belched fire. Three bullets crashed into Bob Rand's middle so swiftly that he died upon his feet. His own Colt was undrawn.

Now the gun-man's gun did come leaping out, to cover Pablo. And now the stolid murderer was metamorphosed into a feral beast that has tasted blood. His lips snarled back over tobacco-stained teeth.

"Don't you — bat your eyes — greaser. H'st your hands, **pronto.**"

Pablo lifted his hands, his face expressionless. He watched Keppin-

ger step over the body of his prey and back toward his horse. When he was out of pistol range Pablo ran to the house for a rifle, but when he had found one Dutch Keppinger had dropped over the brim of the canyon, out of sight.

Chapter XVI

TERRY BLAKE in the brief space of time at his command had done his work thoroughly. He had met more than twenty of the leading Mexican sheepmen, and with Montoya acting as interpreter they had heard the tentative plans for organization for the purpose of defense. Reasoning with the sheepmen, at times arguing, at others cajoling, he had gradually worked them up to a fighting pitch, at last leaving them in the state of firm resolution he desired. Montoya assured him that they would stick.

A half-dozen of the elder men, selected by Eduardo, had been named as delegates to meet with the white sheepmen that night. Now Blake, after having supped with Eduardo Montoya, was resting upon the gallery of Montoya's general store while awaiting the appointed hour; it still lacked a full hour of being that time.

Through the opalescent twilight of the mountains he saw a few horsemen emerge from the surrounding brush and draw rein in the clearing about the store—early birds, these, thought Blake. The group halted; one of the party left the others and advanced alone toward him, a slim, boyish figure in overalls. Blake did not know who it was until less than a dozen feet separated them; then he sprang to his feet.

"Sally! Good heavens, child, what are you doing here?"

He grasped both of her hands. Sally spoke tonelessly, her hands limp in Blake's.

"I asked Pa to bring me with him, Terry. I had to talk with you. Listen, please, we haven't much time."

She withdrew her hands now and folded them tightly across her heart, as if it were to still its wild throbbing. She looked up into Blake's face, her own showing white and drawn in the ray of light which filtered through the open door of the store. The cowboy sensed the emotion with which she was struggling. He said gently.

"All right, sweet; go ahead."

"Terry, Carmelita Montoya came to our place yesterday." The girl's voice was unsteady. "We—had a talk. Terry, have you asked her to marry you?"

Blake's figure stiffened, partly in resentment, mostly in a vast surprise.

"Did Carmelita say that I had?"

"No, not in plain words," Sally said slowly, groping for the right words. "But she wanted to know if you and I were engaged to be married . . . I told her that you had asked me. Then she said how could it be that you had asked both of us to be your wife. Terry Blake—" Sally's voice took on a shrill note. "I want to be fair, to do what is right, to you, to her, to myself. Tell me honestly if you love her. If you do it is . . . all right . . . with me."

While thirty seconds passed Blake stood as a man stunned by a treacherous blow. His brain was reeling in utter confusion; there was a something here he could not quite comprehend. His glance roved dully about as if seeking a concealed foe, then turned slowly back to Sally. Her slender form was trembling like a leaf in the wind, and with sudden passionate

sympathy for the suffering of this girl he loved, Blake reached out his arms and drew her, feebly resisting, into his tight embrace.

"Listen, Sally, and let me whisper this to you so that it will be between our God and you and me. Please believe that I would not lie. I, too, want to be fair. Carmelita Montoya and I have been good friends, pals—I like her, I admire her and she is beautiful and kind. You know, Sally dear, that I never expected to meet you again. I had been lonely, unhappy, and Carmelita might have been misled as to my feelings toward her by some things I said.

"But, honey, I don't love her; I have never in my life even hinted at marriage between us—I have never thought of it myself. I have not kissed her, nor held her in my arms, once. I don't understand this, Sally; it is so different from anything I would have expected from Miss Montoya, and I want to know more about it, the reasons why, before I pass judgment upon her.

"But there is one girl only in all this wide world for me—the one I hold in my arms, Sally darling. Will you let it go at that for the moment?"

For a little while the girl clung to Blake, then she forced his arms apart and stood back. She drew a sleeve across her eyes.

"Well—" there was a little catch in her voice. "I guess I'd better be getting back to the bunch, or Pa will give me fits for keeping him waiting. I'll see you for a minute or two after the meeting, Terry, before we leave."

AT MIDNIGHT a handful of men rode out of Rudiosa. A mile from the town they drew rein to converse briefly, then scattered to ride away singly, or in pairs. Spaulding and Sally and the white sheepmen left in a group, for their ways parted further on. Two men turned toward the east, where there was no trail, and one of them jumped his horse into a run across the rain-washed mesa. The other followed and drew alongside to question mildly:

"W'y you ride so fas', Terree? Bob, heem gone to bed long ago."

"Maybe he has—" replied Terry Blake, "but he won't be in bed ten minutes after we hit the casa. I'm sorta keen to see that cowboy, Felipe; he's all wool and a yard wide."

"Lak' theem sheep, eh?" Felipe said dryly. "Me, I'm lak' Ran' also, ver' much. But to break the leg of thees horse I don' want to see heem that much. Thees dam' rough countree for to run a horse across een the dark, Terree."

Blake slowed to a jolting trot.

"You're right, as usual, compañero. It's foolishness."

They rode on more cautiously. It was a full two hours later when they rounded a spur of a hill within a half-mile of the casa—across the level intervening space a beam of light from a window of the ranch house reached out toward them, flickering redly, as if to beckon them on.

"By Joe!" exclaimed Felipe, "Bob ees not in bed; he stay up for to see you, Terree."

Blake whooped and pressed Redskin with a knee.

"Come on, you slowpoke," he yelled over a shoulder, a glad ring in his voice.

Blake and Felipe reined in before the Casa Verde yelping like wild Indians, for if Rand was up the others doubtless were. The front door opened, silhouetting Pablo's great frame against the light from the hall, stiffly erect.

"Be still!" he commanded sternly.

Terry Blake felt a sudden thrill of alarm.

"Why, Pablo?" he enquired in a low tone. "Is Rosalia asleep? Or — **what's wrong, man? Bob?"**

The last word rang out upon the still air, clamorous with dread apprehension. Pablo bowed his head.

"Si, senor." The Mexican's voice was as gentle as a woman's. "Eet ees bad news, mi amigo. Senor Bob . . . ees gone. He was murdered yesterday."

"Madre de Dios!" wailed Felipe.

But Terry Blake sat stilly in his saddle, unspeaking, unseeing. After dragging minutes he climbed from his horse—his movements were the slow, feeble ones of an aged man.

"Where is he, Pablo?"

In silence the Mexican led the way to the room from which the light had shone. He stood aside so that Blake might enter. A sheet-covered shape was stretched upon a bed, and from Terry Blake's lips there came a drear, whimpering sound.

An hour had elapsed before Blake came into the patio where Felipe and Pablo sat. Rosalia was also there, weeping softly. Terry Blake's face was as if chiseled from marble.

"Tell me about it, Pablo."

Pablo related meticulously the details of the slaying, informing Blake that the killer had surely mistaken Rand for him. Pablo added:

"The man Keppinger has murdered many men, senor, mos' always for pay. I 'ave not seen heem about Lincoln for a year or mo,' an' I was tol' he had gone to El Paso. W'en he was las' here he was on the payroll of John Compton, an' eet has been said that he killed for heem. Quien sabe?"

Terry Blake offered no comment. He demanded, and secured, a minute description of Dutch Keppinger's personal appearance. Blake glanced about then—to the east the sky was taking on a faintly-pink glow; the ebony of night was graying fast.

"I'll sleep for an hour, Pablo," his voice was dead, flat. "Please call me then, and let Rosalia have a pot of strong coffee ready. I will be riding to Lincoln. You go to bed, Felipe, and get some sleep; you will probably need it."

"But, Terree, I'm go weeth you wherever you go, for sure."

"Not today, Felipe. If you are my friend don't ask it."

Blake's tone invited no argument.

DUTCH Keppinger had gone directly to John Compton's house, made his report and collected the balance of his money. From there he repaired to the Harley House and ate a hearty supper. The gunman never drank, he didn't dare to, but he gambled for an hour in the Palace, then went back to the hotel and went to bed. He slept soundly, without dreaming.

He arose early the next morning, had his breakfast, then loafed in the hotel lobby for an hour, smoking. After which he unhurriedly got his horse and jogged out of Lincoln. Dutch wasn't in a hurry; he had no back log in his business.

Hardly had he left when Blake strode into the lobby of the hotel and up to the counter. Sam Hunt started a jocular remark, but checked it abruptly when he saw the look on the cowboy's face.

"I am looking for Dutch Keppinger, Sam," Blake said evenly, "Have you seen him this morning?"

"Yes, Blake," Sam said soberly. "Keppinger checked out half an hour ago and I saw him ride out of town

on the Carrizozo road. He was straddling a flea-bitten gray nag wearing the Triangle brand."

"Thank you, Sam," said Blake.

Sam Hunt watched the cowboy from Texas hasten to his horse and jump into the saddle. Redskin lunged at the bite of the steel. Hunt mused:

"Now I wonder if he's Keppinger's friend? If he's not . . . well, I'd like to see it."

Blake gave the fast bay its head. Through the shallow waters of the ford, splashing showers of spray that glittered like fiery crystals under the sun's slanting rays, Redskin tore. In less than an hour Blake saw a man on a flea-bitten gray jogging leisurely along ahead of him. Blake spurred up and passed the rider at a lope, turning about in his saddle to keenly scrutinize the man's face—there was no mistaking it, he was Dutch Keppinger.

Blake wheeled his horse about and halted in the middle of the road, waiting, and Keppinger, ever alert for danger, also drew rein and straightened in his saddle, eyeing the man ahead of him intently. And at once Dutch realized that this was Terry Blake; that he had slain the wrong man. Perhaps thirty feet separated them. Neither had gone for his weapon, but each was as tense now as a piano wire. Keppinger, sneering disdainfully, awaited the break which he ever wanted. It was Blake who spoke first, his voice hoars with the hate which tormented him.

"You have . . . killed your last man . . . Dutch Keppinger. **Draw!**"

The gunman accepted the challenge instantly, slapping for his six-gun with incredible speed; he fired while Blake's Colt was still lifting . . . the cowboy felt a shocking blow beneath his heart, for the merest instant his mind went blank. But nothing short of death could have stayed his hand now, and almost mechanically his finger twitched the trigger of his weapon. Keppinger's gloating leer of exultation changed to one of pained surprise as a slug drove through the middle of his body. Terry Blake shot him again as he swayed in the saddle, and for a third time as he was toppling sideways to the ground. The three wounds were in the exact center of his stomach — where Bob Rand had been struck— and a man's hand might have covered all.

BLAKE sagged in his seat, gripping Redskin's thighs with his own knees to save himself from falling. The left side of his body was as if paralyzed; he was racked by excruciating pain; his breath came in labored gasps. But after a brief time the pain subsided; his senses cleared; the red film passed from before his vision. Blake sucked the breath into his lungs in a choking sob, then thrust a hand into his shirt bosom. His exploring fingers found only a great, swelling bruise and when he withdrew his fingers they were but faintly tinged with blood.

The cowboy's eyes widened in a sudden look of understanding. From the upper pocket in his heavy flannel shirt he extracted a great double-case silver watch—facetiously styled a 'turnip'—which had been handed down from his grandfather. The gunman's bullet had penetrated the case and was tightly lodged in the works of the ancient time-piece.

Momentarily, Terry Blake's face softened, but quickly grimmed once more. Returning the shattered watch to his pocket, he spurred Redskin to the fallen gunman's side. For a space

of seconds he stared down at the still twitching body lying in the dust of the Carrizozo road; there was no triumph in his look, nor was there regret. Now his face took on a mask of implacable resolve—he wheeled Redskin on his heels and raced back toward Lincoln.

Across the Rio Bonita, past the Montoya house, past the hotel and the jail he sped, halting at the gate of John Compton's home. He strode up the long front walk and twisted the handle of the door bell. A sweet-faced woman with graying hair opened the door. Instinctively Blake removed his hat.

"I have come to see Mr. Compton, ma'am. Is he at home?"

The woman—Blake surmised that she was Compton's wife—gave him a singularly sweet smile; one which suddenly reminded the cowboy of his mother . . . and saved her husband's life.

"John is about somewhere; I'll find him for you," she said. "Won't you come in and sit down? You seem ill."

"Thank you, Mrs. Compton," Blake found himself saying. "But if you please, I'll stay here."

She left and the cowboy heard her call:

"John! Oh, John! One of your men in front to see you."

John Compton's gruff voice responded from somewhere in the rear; his heavy tread resounded in the hall. He came out upon the gallery and at the sight of Blake he recoiled, every drop of blood receding from his face. For once in his life, John Compton was palsied with fear. Terry Blake made no move, said no word, and finally the rancher spoke, haltingly:

"You . . . Blake? I thought—"

"That I was dead," Terry Blake interrupted. "I'm not; your hired assassin murdered an innocent boy, the best friend I ever had, mistaking him for me. You will find Dutch Keppinger's body in the middle of the Corrizozo road, five miles out, **where I left it.** I came here to kill you—I am changing my mind because of a reason you would not understand. But come yourself next time, John Compton."

Blake turned away, walking with the stiff-legged gait of a stag hound torn from its well-earned kill. At the jail he drew up and went into Thorpe's office. The sheriff was seated at his desk and he did not get up at sight of Blake; he was physically unable to do so.

"SHERIFF Thorpe," said Blake, without preface, "a young man named Rand, a boy from Texas, was murdered at the Casa Verde last night by Dutch Keppinger; shot down without a chance. Keppinger took Rand for me—John Compton paid him to kill me. What are you going to do about it?"

Thorpe struggled to his feet now, his face ashen. He well knew from the conversation he had overheard that what Blake claimed was doubtless true. Yet he equivocated:

"No, no Blake. He . . . Compton . . . he wouldn't do that."

"I told you that he **did,**" the cowboy said icily, and what the sheriff read in his face set him to shaking anew. And indeed Terry Blake was at that moment nearer to being the killer he so dreaded becoming than at any time in his life: his finger trembled upon the trigger, the lust to slay burned in his eyes with an unholy light. Thorpe quailed before him, belatedly wishing that he had stayed with his job in the livery sta-

ble. But he now spoke with such earnestness as to half convince Blake that he was wholly innocent of complicity in the plot.

"You must be wrong about Compton, Blake. But I'll get a posse together right now and arrest Keppinger. Do you know where he is?"

Blake had mastered his violent passion. He said:

"Yes, I know. You can't arrest him but you can get his body. It is out on the Carrizozo road about six miles. I killed him. I am going to the Casa Verde now, Mr. John Compton's sheriff, I'll be there. If you want me come out there—**and come a shooting.**"

Blake swung about on his heels. The sheriff watched him through a window as he rode away—it seemed to Thorpe that he was always watching the fellow ride away, and praying that he would not turn back.

Chapter XVII

SHERIFF Ben Thorpe swabbed the cold sweat from his brow and sat down to do some heavy thinking, and shortly his forehead furrowed in an effort at concentration.

He knew that as surely as God made little apples John Compton would be along as quickly as he could get to the jail and that he would order him, Thorpe, to go after Blake. The sheriff's very soul abhorred this task. If Dutch Keppinger, hitherto invincible gunman, had proven helpless before Blake then what chance would he have? Not as much as a snowball in hell! Thorpe knew that. True, he could take a posse with him, but Thorpe knew from experience that a posse merely provided a background for the duly constituted officer who led it. If it came to a fight—and Thorpe held no belief to the contrary—then he, the sheriff, would draw Blake's first fire. And Blake did not miss. The sheriff shivered at the thought.

On the other hand, supposing that he proved lucky; that he, or one of the posse, got Blake. What then? Craven though he might be, Ben Thorpe was far from being a fool. His thoughtful judgment told him that this would not be the end, but only the beginning. Don Guadalupe de Montoya was no quitter; he would fight to the bitter end, if need be. But first he would demand of the territorial authorities that a searching investigation be made. And Montoya had great influence in Santa Fe; the governor and he were friends of long standing. The investigation would surely disclose the unlawful plotting of the cattlemen; the employment of Dutch Keppinger to slay Blake; the killing of the innocent Texas cowboy without the slightest provocation. The sheriff of Lincoln county would be thrown to the wolves—hadn't he overheard Compton when he told Tomlison so?

The more Thorpe thought over the matter the surer he became that no results could save him from being the goat. And Thorpe did not crave the part; it was up to him to figure a quick way out.

Ben Thorpe pondered as he had never done before in his irresponsible life, and suddenly his vacant eyes gleamed into life—he had found the solution to his problem and it was such a simple one that he wondered that he had not thought of it before. Ben Thorpe knew just what he was going to do.

Hence, when John Compton flung roughly into the office Thorpe was ready for him. Even then he shrank

back at the first sight of his patron's blackly scowling countenance. Yet he had mentally rehearsed his role and he played the part exceedingly well. He greeted the rancher affably:

"Howdy, Mr. Compton, howdy; set down, set down. I was just wonderin' what had become of you."

The cattleman slumped into a seat, and the sheriff noted that his face was haggard, his eyes blood-shot. Compton said:

"Listen, Thorpe. That gunman, Blake, was at my house an hour ago and he informed me that he had just killed Dutch Keppinger."

"Killed Keppinger?" Thorpe's surprise was excellently simulated. "I didn't know Dutch was around. Why did Blake do it?"

"I suppose it was because of an old quarrel between them," Compton lied: "Probably Keppinger heard Blake was here and came here to finish it—and wasn't quite good enough. But that's neither here nor there. Listen to me, Thorpe, and don't interrupt me again. Blake killed him; he told me so himself. And that gives us the toe-hold we want. You get the justice of the peace and go after Keppinger's body—it is lying on the Carrizozo road some five miles out of town Blake said. Have Judge Simon hold an inquest on the spot and return a verdict of murder against Blake. Bring the corpse into Lincoln; if Keppinger hasn't any folks—and I don't think that he has—I'll pay for the burying."

He lifted a hand as Thorpe made as if to speak.

"Dam it, Thorpe, I told you to **listen.** This is the main thing. After you bring in the corpse swear in a posse and **go get** Blake. He'll be at the Casa Verde. He will resist arrest, of course. Shoot him down, like the dog he is. Now do you understand? Excuses won't go this time, Thorpe."

The sheriff straightened up, his lips a thin line.

"Yes, I understand, Compton. And I'll do what you say, except in one thing. I don't want no posse. If Blake killed Dutch the sooner he is bumped off the better it will be for everybody; he's a wolf and he's dangerous. But, Compton, this will hafta be between me and Blake alone. I know I wouldn't have a chance in a stand-up fight, posse or no posse. I'm the one who will hafta call his hand if he resists arrest, ain't I? So I don't propose to take any chances—I ain't goin' to follow no set rules, law or no law. Consequently, **I don't want no witnesses along.** You sabe?"

COMPTON did understand, and the look he bent on the sheriff was a curious blend of doubt, astonishment and new-born respect. That Thorpe proposed to dry-gulch the Texas cowboy was quite plain. But, at that, he was taking long chances in going it alone. However, Thorpe ought to know what he could do, and his plan might be the better one; it would at least simplify matters. And the less conversation about it the better it would be. So he acceded with some warmth.

"You are more of a man than I thought, Ben. All right, have it your way, but don't bungle the job. And be careful; I don't want to lose you. If you pull this off your extra pay on the Triangle roll will be double. Good luck to you."

Thorpe reached for his pistol belt, hanging from a peg.

"Well, then there's no mo' to be said. I'll be goin'." When Compton had gone the sheriff smiled as grimly as Ben Thorpe knew how to do.

"You are goin' to lose me, all right, mister," he soliloquised.

Thorpe went out to look or his deputy; he found him in a back-tilted chair on he sunny side of the jail.

"Buck, you go get Judge Simon right away," he directed. "Tell him I want an inques' held out on the Carrizozo road about five miles, where a man was killed. It's Dutch Keppinger. Tell Simon to come in his wagon so he can bring the corpse back—the buryin' will be paid for by John Compton, tell him."

With a coroner's fee and a burial in prospect, the Justice of the Peace, who was also the undertaker, lost no time in coming. Thorpe accompanied him, and they found all that was left of Dutch Keppinger where he had fallen, flat upon its back with the sightless eyes still reflecting unbelieving surprise. Judge Simon, whose knowledge of the law was derived from the use of an old copy of Blackstone as a cushion for his chair, viewed the body, squinted up the Carrizozo road, then down it, and returned his verdict—murder in the first degree against one Terry Blake. He brought the body back in his wagon, and Thorpe swore out a warrant for Blake's arrest.

The sheriff left him and repaired to the jail. Entering his office, he closed the door and turned the key in the lock, then he drew the window shades down as far as they would go. After which he seated himself at his desk, dumped the contents out of the drawers one at a time and went through the contents with patient care, placing some of the accumulation of papers in his pockets and returning others to the drawers. This accomplished, Thorpe twirled the combination of a small steel safe until the tumblers clicked; one compartment held a tin box half filled with county money, mostly limp and dingy currency. Thorpe counted the money and stowed it in his pockets. For a minute or two he stood stroking his chin in thought, then he made up a saddle-roll consisting of two old army blankets and a yellow slicker.

He belted a second Colt about his waist, slung a Winchester rifle over a shoulder, and hoisted the window shades. He then went out, locking the door of the office and shoving the key back through the crack beneath the door. His horse was hitched in the back yard of the jail which was now wholly deserted, the sheriff having sent his deputy away with the undertaker.

Sheriff Thorpe tied the blanket-roll behind the cantle of his saddle, hitched up his gun-belt and climbed into the saddle. He was ready to get his man.

THORPE rode down the street sitting straight up in the saddle and with his eyes grimly front; to the few persons he passed he vouchsafed a curt official nod. When across the Bonita he turned into the canyon road and spurred his horse into a canter. An hour later he reined in near its mouth, halting behind a screen of outjutting rock from where he had an unobstructed view of the green house which squatted on the mesa above him. The sheriff bit a chunk from the end of a plug of tobacco and while he chewed ruminatively he studied the terrain about him, as if planning the best way to approach the house unseen. He drew his rifle from its scabbard.

Felipe had gone around by one of his father's sheep camps on his way to Lincoln, hence he had missed

Terry Blake returning to the Casa Verde after his meeting with Keppinger. It was after noon when he arrived at his home and he found Bruce McFarland there, visiting with Carmelita. In a few clipped words Felipe informed them of the murder of Bob Rand, and of Terry Blake's departure to—as Felipe thought—call Keppinger to account. Then requesting Bruce to learn, if he could, if Blake and Keppinger had met, Felipe set out post-haste for Rudiosa. For Felipe, sobered by the tragedy, knew that the sheepmen must be strongly rallied at once against the trouble which now would surely and quickly come.

Old Don Guadalupe was shocked into impassioned anger, his old-time fighting spirit fiercely aroused. Carmelita had little to say, but her face blanched as Felipe told of Terry Blake's obvious intent to challenge Dutch Keppinger; she felt a sickening dread within her. As Felipe hastened away she turned imploring eyes on Bruce McFarland.

"Go now, Bruce, please, and learn w'at has happened—if Terree and Keppinger have met. I have heard no pistol shots thees mornin' and perhaps all ees well. If you fin' Terree, bring heem back weeth you."

"All right, Carmelita, I'll go right away," said Bruce. "If I learn anything I will come straight back and tell you. Don't fret too much about Blake, though; he'll likely come out okey—I've seen that hombre in action."

Bruce hurried off on his mission with an ache in his heart, for the girl he loved with an undying devotion had shown all too plainly her interest in Blake. And now with the discerning eyes of a lover he sensed that he had been riding a blind trail. Bruce saw nothing of Terry Blake, but he learned from Sam Hunt that he had been at the hotel, but had left. Hunt said nothing about Keppinger. Mcoped the fact that there had been no Farland's cautious enquiries develunusual occurrence in Lincoln that morning. He was on his way back to the Montoya home when he saw the coroner's wagon drive past him with a sheet-covered body lying in it. McFarland turned back. Within ten minutes the word of the affray was all over Lincoln and Bruce learned that it was Keppinger who had been slain. He stood around for awhile, then hastened back to Carmelita with a lightened heart; the girl heard the news with a quick intake of her breath, the color flooding back to her pallid cheeks.

While they were still talking it over Sheriff Thorpe rode by the house alone, two short-guns strapped conspicuously about his waist and a rifle in his saddle scabbard.

"There's the gallant sheriff now!" Bruce exclaimed, pointing out the window. "He's going after Blake, I'll bet a horse. And all by his lonely! What do you know about that!"

"I hope that Terree kills heem also." Carmelita's eyes flashed fire. "Eef I was only a man . . ."

"Hush, Carmelita." Don Guadalupe bade sternly. "You mus' not talk so; already there has been too much bloodshed. We would have peace, if we may."

"Peace? Weeth those men?" Carmelita cried. "There can be no such theeng, mi padre. Even now the man Thorpe goes to slay Terree Blake, mos' likely from ambush. Else—" she added shrewdly, "he would not dare go alone."

Bruce McFarland stood up.

"Well, folks, I must be moving

along; I've been loafing too much. I think I'll ride out to the Casa Verde and strike Blake for a job."

Carmelita's lips trembled.

"Thank you, Bruce, my dear, dear fren'. Eet ees like you."

Impulsively she lifted upon her toes and kissed McFarland upon the lips.

Bruce McFarland accepted his accolade, and buried his hopes. Whistling bravely, he left. Returning to the Harley House he buckled on his Colt, then followed after the sheriff riding swiftly.

KEITH Spaulding went to town in his wagon early, for not knowing what might come up he wanted to lay in a stock of supplies. As he turned into the Lincoln road at the foot of the slope, Terry Blake swept around the bend. He was running his horse. He slid to a stop when he saw the sheepman, and Spaulding was startled at the look upon his face.

"What's up, Terry?" he asked.

In a few words Blake told him what had happened at the casa, impatient at the delay. He added:

"I am on my way to Lincoln now, Spaulding, to attend to some matters in connection with it. I'm in a hurry and I'll see you later."

He jumped Redskin into a run again. Spaulding followed slowly, immersed in gloomy thought. Blake had told both the sheepman and Sally all about Rand at their first meeting and now Spaulding surmised what the matter was that Blake was speeding to attend to.

It required some time at the store to have his order filled, and when he was through he instructed that the purchases be loaded into a wagon and then he strolled down the street. A knot of silent spectators was gathered about a wagon a few doors away and as the sheepman approached, two men carried a sheeted body into the undertaker's place of business. Spaulding's breathing almost stopped, he addressed a slim young cowboy who was standing to one side, silently looking on.

"Have you heard who the dead man is young fella?" he asked.

"Yes," the cowboy replied shortly. "It is Dutch Keppinger, the dirtiest killer who ever went unhung."

Spaulding felt an almost overwhelming surge of relief.

"Did somebody shoot him?"

"A cowboy killed him—in a stand-up fight."

His informant, Bruce McFarland, pivoted on his heel and strode away. Spaulding hastened to his wagon and drove home, pressing his team all of the way. Sally listened stonily to his news, her ace growing whiter and whiter — Spaulding, noticing this, changed the subject. He unloaded the supplies from the wagon, unharnessed the horses, then threw a saddle on one, for he must locate his sheep, which were grazing back in the hills attended by Shep. Spaulding intended to keep the sheep penned in the corral for a while.

When her father had gone Sally came out of the house to stand on the porch gazing with tear-wet eyes toward the Casa Verde. She could see two men moving about the yard and she thought that one was Terry Blake; she was gripped by a passionate longing to go and comfort him. And at that moment she noticed a horseman on the road below and when she saw the rider's warlike equipment she scrutinized him closely. Sally knew Sheriff Thorpe, or in his ex-officio capacity of tax collector he had once called upon her father,

remaining for an hour or more, chatting. Later her father had informed her that the sheriff was a tool of John Compton. The man on the road was he! Instantly Sally felt, as Carmelita had done, that the officer was going, not to arrest Terry Blake, but to slay him treacherously. She quivered in anger at the thought, following Thorpe with her eyes.

She saw the officer stop a few hundred yards further on in the shadow of an overhanging cliff, where he was hidden from the sight of anyone at the casa. He sat there staring up at the house; after a bit he drew his rifle from its scabbard.

SALLY WAS seized by a blind, unreasoning rage. She would slay this treacherous sheriff herself with as little compunction as she would put an end to a mad coyote. She ran into the house and took her father's Sharps rifle from its rack on the wall, a weapon she had often fired at wild game; with fingers that shook from passion she loaded it. Then clutching the heavy weapon to her bosom she stumbled down the slope to the floor of the canyon. Now Thorpe was in view again, still in the same place, in the same position, but he had returned the rifle to its scabbard. Scorning any attempt at concealment the girl sped down the gulch, panting from her violent efforts. Presently she stopped—she was in range now. But no! a little nearer, she must not miss. She sprinted again, drawing her waning breath in gasping sobs. Now! Sally knelt and cocked the rifle, not trembling now, but with steel-taut nerves. She lifted the weapon, settled the butt against her shoulder . . . its sight bore squarely on the back of the man ahead . . . Sally's finger curled about the trigger. Ben Thorpe was never to know how near certain death he was at that moment.

So intent upon her purpose was the girl that she had failed to hear the tread of a horse behind her, or its rider when he leapt from the saddle and ran up to her. She did not know the man was there until a hand reached over her shoulder and grasped her rifle, a thumb beneath the reared-back hammer blocking it as it fell.

"I wouldn't do that, miss," a quiet voice admonished. "It's bad business —not that I wouldn't like to do it myself."

Sally sprang erect to face the newcomer like a tigress at bay. She looked into the face of a young cowboy and in it she read understanding and a deep commiseration.

"That man—" she panted hoarsely, pointing an acusing finger at the still motionless Thorpe, "is there to murder my dearest friend, Terry Blake."

"I know, miss—I've followed him from town. But he can't do it from there. My name is Bruce McFarland and I am a friend of Blake myself; I am on my way to the Casa Verde now. Suppose we wait awhile and see what Thorpe has in mind to do."

Just then the musing sheriff turned his horse and rode on. McFarland took the heavy Sharps from Sally's hand, grasped one of her hands.

"What say we climb up the hill a ways," he suggested, "so we can keep an eye on Mister Thorpe."

Half leading, half dragging the girl he helped her up the steep hillside; they found a spot on the flat top of a boulder and they could see the sheriff again. Thorpe had proceeded along the trail to a point much beyond where he should have turned off were he attempting to reach the

Sally did not know the man was there until a hand reached out and twisted her rifle sideways.

casa unobserved. McFarland was puzzled at that and he was even more mystified when the sheriff turned east and headed for the prairie. McFarland fully agreed with Sally that the sheriff's purpose was to bushwhack Terry Blake, but how could he accomplish it by taking to the open prairie?

McFarland continued his watch, although the sheriff was now a distant figure. Then he saw Thorpe urge his horse into a fast lope, heading toward the Texas line. McFarland let out a whoop that carried all the distance to the green house.

"Come on, Miss Spaulding, let's go," he cried jubilantly, "the office of sheriff of Lincoln county is plumb vacant."

TERRY BLAKE and Pablo were in the yard of the casa deciding upon a place where the remains of Bob Rand might be interred until his people in Texas could be reached when they heard Bruce McFarland's triumphant yell. They lifted their gaze and could see no one. But shortly a horseman hove in sight at the top of the canyon brim and bore toward them in a gallop. Said Pablo:

"Eet ees Bruce McFarlan', I theenk. He ees good fren' of Felipe. There ees someone ridin' behin' hees saddle."

Terry Blake's eyesight was equally as keen as that of the other.

"Yes, it's McFarland," he agreed. "I know him, Pablo, and he is all right. That is Sally Spaulding with him—more bald news, I'm afraid."

As McFarland yanked his horse to a stop he erased the grin from his face.

"Terry—" he said solemnly, "I am afraid that you will never see Sheriff Ben Thorpe again."

"Why?" Blake queried sharply.

McFarland's grin came back.

"Because he has just struck out for the Gulf of Mexico and I don't think that he'll stop before he gets there. He's vamoosed."

Blake smiled with his lips only.

"Tell me more about it."

Briefly McFarland told him all that he and Sally had witnessed. He went on: "And that's that, Terry. I've come to enlist for the war."

Terry Blake's haggard eyes softened; he said quietly:

"That's the best news yet, Bruce."

For the first time, it seemed, he took notice of Sally. He reached up his arms and lifted her, rifle and all, from her perch on the crupper, and still holding her in his arms, asked gently:

"What's on your mind, Sally girl?"

Bruce McFarland spoke up quickly.

"Miss Spaulding saw the sheriff down in the canyon and guessed that he was looking or you, so she started across to give you warning. I happened along and brought her over."

Terry Blake's glance fell to the Sharps, back to Sally's face. He understood all, and when he spoke his voice was rich with feeling.

"Thank you, Bruce. If I can borrow your caballo I'll take Sally back now. I've a lot to tell her."

Chapter XVIII

PAT O'HEARN reached Lincoln the next morning, accompanied by a number of his cowboys, each of whom boasted that he had cut his teeth on the sight of a six-gun. Over a bottle of rye John Compton acquainted him with the latest news. But not even to his old friend and oft-times accomplice in near-crime did he mention that he had hired

Dutch Keppinger to slay the Texas cowboy. He told O'Hearn, as he had Thorpe:

"There must have been an old grudge between the two and Dutch doubtless heard that Blake was here and came after him. Keppinger never forgot or forgave. But this time he overplayed his hand.

"The killing occurred out on the Carizozo road, so nobody knows just what did happen, but the coroner told me that Keppinger was shot from the front—three times in a place the size of your hand. Keppinger's gun had been fresh fired. So I guess it was on the level.

"However, Pat, it proves that Blake is poison; you know the rep Dutch had as well as I do. Now I've got Blake by the tail with a down-hill pull. When he shot the gambler in the Palace I couldn't do much about it, because Hall admitted that he had drawn first. Besides public sentiment was with him then."

"Public sentiment 'sfar as I am concerned—" said O'Hearn dryly, "is with him now. I'd give him a bonus if I had my way."

"Oh bosh!" Compton said testily. "You make me tired, Pat. Anyway, Sheriff Thorpe is out now to arrest Blake—I should hear rom him at any minute. And, by the way, O'Hearn, I haven't been giving Thorpe his dues; he has a lot more guts than I supposed. He will probably get Blake—in his own way, maybe, but that cuts no ice with me. Yet one of them is almost sure to be bumped off. If it is Blake, well and good. If Blake kills an officer in the discharge of his duty, I'll have him sent up for life . . . that is, if I can't get him lynched here.

"However, Blake has done plenty of harm already. I've had a man snooping around among the Mexicans and he learned that ever since Blake went to work for Montoya he has been stirring the sheepers to action. He and Felipe Montoya had a meeting of the sheepmen, Americans and Mexicans, at Rudiosa. They formed the Mexicans into companies, each group with an American as captain. That's bad, Pat; you know it. We must crimp the movement pronto."

In the absence of the astute Tomlison's restraining influence the two old cronies worked together like a well trained carriage team. O'Hearn promptly concurred.

"Sure, we will crimp 'em. And I've brought the bully boys who can do it along wid me. You know the ropes, John; what's the first move in the game?"

Compton reached in his pocket and threw the letter which Carmelita had written on the table.

"Read that. I got it in the mail a couple of days ago."

Pat O'Hearn scanned the missive, then studied it intently. He ran his fingers through his grizzled locks abstractedly.

"From a woman," he commented, "and the handwrite disguised. Who do you think wrote it, John?"

"How would I know?" Compton spoke irritably. "But it's straight goods, all right, so what does it matter? I had never heard of this man Spaulding before I got the note, but Rollins knew about him and had talked to him. Spaulding bought the sheep ranch an old man named Southwell owned; just across the canyon from the Casa Verde. Guadalupe Montoya had it for sale for Southwell. So it all hangs together; probably Montoya brought Spaulding in here. He brought with him a fair sized flock of sheep, good stock, Rol-

lins says. He keeps 'em at night in a tight corral on the place, bringing 'em in every afternoon. That looks to me like Spaulding has had sheep trouble before this.

"He hasn't been here long, hardly six weeks, but he's already a bellwether among the white sheepers. Also he's an old friend of Blake and —listen to this, Pat—Spaulding took every last white sheepman to the meeting in Rudiosa."

John Compton jarred the table with a blow from his fist.

"And, by God! he's started something. Our very first move, O'Hearn, will be to raid Spaulding's corral—this very night. We'll shoot every damn sheep he has, or scatter them to the four winds. And if Spaulding gets in the way we'll pile him with the sheep."

Pat O'Hearn tapped the missive on the table top with a finger, saying thoughtfully:

"And, then, you've no suspicion that this may be a trap?"

"Hell, no!" Compton snorted. "It's from some spiteful hussy Spaulding has let down. It's no trap, but anyanyway we will send our men in strength; Joe Rigsby will lead 'em and anybody who catches Rigsby in a trap must stay up all night. It will be a lead-pipe cinch and may put an end to the whole movement. The Mex sheepers will be goin' around lookin' over their shoulders, even in daytime."

"All right, John, you're the doctor," O'Hearn consented. " 'Tis only that when there's a shemale mixed up with any business of mine it generally goes haywire. However, I'm wid ye."

"Then send your men out to the Triangle now—not in a bunch, but one or two at a time." Compton directed. "Rigsby will take care of 'em. You stay to supper with me and we'll ride out after dark and see the raiding party off. Then we'll come back here and stir up a poker game—I've got a case of good rye straight from El Paso."

SALLY SPAULDING was unusually restless; she could not be still. Her father had gone to his room adjoining her own, and to bed, an hour earlier. Sally could hear him snoring lustily. But the homely sound which usually served to quiet her when she was nervous—as she often was of late—did not work tonight. The girl had taken a lamp from a shelf and had placed it on a low table, sitting beside it to scan a week-old El Paso paper which her father had brought from town. But Sally could not concentrate on it; she could not still her jumping nerves. She was in the hold of an unaccountable premonition of danger, one so immediately compelling as to be almost a tangible threat. What was wrong with her, she wondered? Why should she feel this sudden, appalling surge of a terror so acute that it tightened her breast as a physical pain? That inspired her with an almost irresistible impulse to shriek.

True, she was fearfully anxious, had been for days, over the general situation; the narrow escape of Terry Blake from a hired assassin's bullet, the imminence of a sheep war that might take her father, her friends, from her. But these things were more or less remote; there had been no marked change in the situation to occasion alarm. This, though . . .

In quick exasperation at herself, Sally tossed the newspaper aside and went to the front door. A half moon was riding high in the skies, obscured

now and then by floating masses of black rimmed clouds. The night was warm, the atmosphere sticky and oppressive; it was going to rain, was the girl's fleeting thought. She sat down upon the steps of the porch, but after a moment went back into the room to extinguish the light, then returned and sat down once more.

The night was filled with familiar, reassuring noises; the ululating cry of a hunting coyote far out upon the mesa; the rasping buzz of a busy cicada; the plaintive plea of a hungry lamb in the corral . . . Then all at once there came to her ears the snort of a horse, the jingle of a snaffle bit, the tread of shod hooves. The sounds were faint, but to her attuned ears distinct and unmistakable. Cowboys on the road below, no doubt, returning from a session of play in Lincoln. Every-day sounds which should have been comforting. Yet now they but enhanced her alarm.

Leaving the door standing open, Sally flung herself, fully clad upon her bed. Thoughts were pounding at her brain, swiftly crowding one upon another. Terry Blake . . . Carmelita Montoya . . . the murder of Bob Rand, the . . .

The harassed girl fell into a slumber which was little more than a subconscious state. She was aroused by a sound without which sliced into her dormant faculties with the incisiveness of a knife thrust. Shep was sounding an alarm! Not barking, but giving tongue to deep, throaty growls which told Sally that he was at bay.

The girl sprang from her couch and ran to the door. The moon was behind a cloud, yet the visibility was good. The collie was three hundred feet down the slope, backing up it slowly and snarling at every step before a group of shadowy figures.

"FATHER!" Sally shrilled.

A rifle whanged then. The girl saw a spurt of flame, heard the collie's pained yelp. Now the men were running toward the sheep corral, spreading out to surround it, leaning over the breast-high walls. A staccato rattle of fire from a dozen short-guns deafened her. The sheep were milling now, bleating in wild terror, offering a target which might not be missed even in the dim light. Again and again the weapons chattered.

SALLY clamped her hands over her ears to shut out the hideous din and turned back into the room. She collided with her father. He had pulled on his trousers, and he held the Sharps rifle in his hands. Spaulding pushed Sally roughly aside.

"Stay in the house, girl. Shut the door; don't light the lamp."

Sally had never heard that note in her father's voice; she shuddered at the ferocity of it. She swayed on her feet, her senses reeling.

Spaulding halted in the doorway, peering into the gloom . . . the moon glided from behind a cloud, showering the corral with lambent effulgence . . . the sheepmen levelled the rifle with a steady hand.

The weapon thundered; one of the raiders gave voice to a despairing cry, which faded to a ghastly rattle in his throat. The rifle spoke again.

Exhausted by the physical and emotional strain of the past twenty-four hours, Terry Blake had thrown himself down upon a bed, removing only his shoes. He had fallen instantly asleep, and it

seemed to him that he had not been lying there for more than a minute when he aroused with a start, the report of a rifle ringing in his ears. He lifted upon an elbow, listening. No foreign sound broke the still of the night. Blake settled back upon his pillow, yet the feeling of uneasiness persisted; he got out of bed.

In his stocking feet he went to the door and peered out into the hall; all was quiet. Lighting a lamp which stood upon a table, he glanced at the clock—it still lacked two hours of midnight. He was in the act of blowing out the light when again a rifle cracked, unmistakable this time. Immediately it was followed by a volley of reports which his trained ears told him was from six-guns; another and another. Blake grabbed for his shoes. When a minute later he hurried out into the patio he met Pablo. At Pablo's elbow was Rosalia, carrying a lighted lantern.

"You hear that firing, Pablo?" Blake queried.

"For sure, that ees w'y I am up," Pablo replied imperturbably." Eet ees, I think, at Spaulding's."

"God!" Blake ejaculated. "Then the cattlemen are raiding him! Get your rifle, Pablo; your Colts, too. I'll call Bruce and we'll go to Spaulding's help."

It was not necessary to call McFarland, for at that moment he ran into the patio fully clothed and buckling on his pistol. The firing across the gulch was continuing; now and then came the reverberating roar of a heavier gun.

"That's Spaulding's Sharps," Blake observed. "Thank God! he's still in action."

McFarland's eyes were aflame.

"I hadn't gone to bed, Terry," said he. "Hell's popping over there. Let's ramble."

Something jerked at Terry Blake's heart strings, so like his murdered pal was this eager boy.

"We are going, all right, Bruce," said he gently. "Take a rifle along; it will be long-range work mostly. But be careful, mi amigo—you've got folks who will grieve a lot if you're hurt."

"I won't be hurt, Terry," crowed young McFarland. "It'll be the other fella."

TERRY Blake led the way. Rifles tucked beneath their legs, short-guns at their hips, the three coursed down the slope into the canyon. The firing had lulled in volume; from the heights above revolvers barked sporadically. Apparently the raiders had hunted cover, the reason for this made plain by the occasional roar of the Sharps.

"Spaulding seems to have driven them back, anyway," Blake commented tightly. "He's still holding out. We will take cover here in the canyon and spot the flashes of the pistols up there, then we will open up from here with our rifles. Probably we won't do much damage, but we'll draw the raiders away from Spaulding —— they'll know that sooner or later we will get one or two of them."

"Eet ees good!" Pablo acclaimed, then slipped away into the gloom, leading his horse. Blake and McFarland sheltered their mounts behind boulders, then found nests for themselves among the rocks bordering the gulch.

From a hundred yards down the canyon Pablo's Winchester

cracked, over and over and over. Blake and McFarland followed him into action, flinging lead as fast as they might work the levers of their rifles, searching out the flashes of fire upon the mesa. The Sharps boomed twice again in spaced intervals, as though it were a signal that Spaulding knew help was at hand.

Almost at once the firing from the six-guns ceased; the hill was quiet and dark. Blake surmised that the leader of the raiders had cannily silenced his guns. Which was the case. Joe Rigsby, veteran of many range battles, had quickly passed the word to his men when the rifles opened up from below. Rigsby knew that with the sole exception of himself none of the party carried rifles, and Rigsby had his only because it chanced to be in the saddle scabbard when he saddled. Cowboys are short-gun men. Now Rigsby realized, that as Blake had said, if his men continued to disclose their positions it was but a matter of time when a slug would find its mark. One by one the men came back and assembled about Rigsby.

Rigsby pondered. From observation of the flashes of the rifles below he had concluded that there were but three marksmen there. He must either rout them out or withdraw his men with the object of the raid only half accomplished, in which case Compton would be as sore as hell. Finally he said:

"We have to stampede that bunch down there, boys—there are only three. Two of you men crawl back up the hill and put that Sharps out of action. Then break down the corral walls in two, three places and stampede the woollies. There's no use in beefing any more of them.

"All the balance of you come with me. We are goin' to charge them fellas from behind the rocks to the north of them; in that way we can take away from them the advantage of their rifles. Follow me and keep still, don't talk. We want to get to the rocks without them knowing it, so when we leave our cover to charge 'em they will be took by surprise. Don't break away 'til I give the word. Now come on."

Terry Blake thought that he understood the sudden cessation of the firing, but he did not understand the long silence that ensued. He listened anxiously. All at once a dusky figure loomed up at his side, noiseless as an Indian on the warpath. Pablo spoke in a whisper:

"Manee men come down the hill, Senor Blake; maybe eight or ten. I'm theenk they weel get their horses an' charge us. Or else they weel leave. But I don't theenk so."

"Nor do I, Pablo," Blake agreed. "They're not through yet. And I wouldn't ask anything better than to have 'em charge us, now that we know they're coming. With us lying behind the rocks while they loom up against the sky-line like a light house we will set the whelps back on their heels. Go to your post and open up when you see them. Use your six-gun. Stop at McFarland's hole-up and tell him what to do."

Three, six, ten minutes dragged interminably by: a gun barked far down the gulch and with it came the throb of hoofbeats on the canyon floor. A raider whooped. There came a burst of firing from

about the Spaulding house. The Sharps spoke in reply, just once.

"Get ready, Mac!" Blake yelled. "They're coming."

HE flung his rifle aside and drew his Colt, standing erect behind his low breastwork. Came a number of horsemen on a dead run, shooting as they came. Pablo first, then McFarland opened up on them, but Blake held his fire, grimly waiting. A rider shrieked, coughed chokingly, his horse swept on riderless — Pablo had scored. Too late, Joe Rigsby realized the error into which he had fallen — his men could not see the foe hidden among the rocks.

"Go on through, boys!" he yelled back at the top of his voice. Get outa here, dam' quick."

As the riders breasted McFarland's pile of rocks, Terry Blake heard a cry of pain from one of the men . . .

As they breasted McFarland's pile of rocks from which came betraying flashes the raiders flung a volley. Terry Blake heard a cry of pain; one of the cowboys let out an exultant yell. Blake cursed aloud—Bob Rand, now Bruce McFarland. His jaw clamped.

Blake's position was well without the canyon's mouth, where its sidewalls flattened, and he had chosen it as the point of greatest danger, since it was open from attack from all sides. But now it

stood him in good stead, for the cowboys were sharply outlined against the setting moon.

The raiders came strung out like clothes-pins on a line. They were almost opposite Blake . . . now they were. Purposely, he let three pass him, the fourth he blasted from the saddle with his first bullet. The successive reports from his Colts were as evenly spaced as the ticking of a clock — crack! crack! crack! A second cowboy swore bitterly, lurched over, clinging to the pommel of his saddle . . . a pony squealed as a bullet stung him . . . then the last man was by. Blake could tell when they reined in to a standstill a full three hundred yards away.

There was no more firing from the hilltop; Spaulding's rifle had been ominously silent for some minutes. A stillness of death now hung over the canyon. Blake ran hastily to McFarland's place of concealment.

"Bruce? Are you hurt?"

McFarland was lying behind the pile of rocks.

"Yes, but I don't think it is bad, Blake." The boy's voice was grievously weak, thought Blake. "I played the fool by leaving my cover to get a better aim. I had it coming, all right."

Blake knelt beside him.

"Where, Bruce?"

"My — right — side."

Blake ripped the boy's garments apart and groped with his fingers —he withdrew his hand, sticky with blood. Under cover of the rocks he struck a match. McFarland had a raw, slashing wound in his side, but to his relief Blake saw that the lead pellet had gone on through; the wound was bad enough, however, and should have immediate attention. He unknotted the large bandana handkerchief from about his own neck and folded it over the wound.

"Hold this tight against the wound, Bruce, to check the bleeding while I call Pablo."

"I am here, Terree." Pablo had stolen up behind him like a creeping shadow. "Bruce, he ees hurt bad?"

"Not dangerously, I think, Pablo," Blake told the Mexican foreman. "How about you?"

"Me, I'm all right," said Pablo gloomily. "I'm keel won of theem fellas, Terree."

"Good work," Terry Blake commended with bitter brevity. "So did I. Now, Pablo, you do the best you can to stop that bleeding so that we can get Bruce to the casa. I'll strike matches and hold them so that you can see. Work as fast as you can, before those goddam bastards try it again."

"Me, I'm doin' theenk they try eet again; not tonight." said Pablo. "I'm theenk they lose some men on the mesa, maybe."

However, he worked swiftly and with a skill born of long experience. From his coat pocket he took out a small, flat package of linen strips and a jar of salve.

Rosalia put t h e e m een my pocket w'en I say I don' want theem. She see plenty fights befo' thees. Hol' theem matches nearer, Senor Blake."

Chapter XIX

MEANWHILE Joe Rigsby was taking stock. He found that three of his men were missing, not counting the two he had sent back

to Spaulding's corral, and who were still on the mesa. One of the missing three had been slain by Spaulding's first fire. Two were lying in the canyon and probably both of these were dead. Two of the cowboys now with him were gravely wounded. Five out of the twelve, including himself, who had formed the raiding party. The Triangle foreman's pent up resentment at their employers burst its bounds.

"Damn their black souls to hell!" he swore bitterly, "Settin' on their fat rumps in town a swillin' whiskey while their forty dollar hands are out here bein' killed! And for what? So that they can make a few more dirty dollars. I'm through. We are goin' home."

One voice muttered rebelliously, a hardy followers of O'Hearn's.

"Shut up, you," Rigsby snarled. "We've got three dead men already and maybe two more on the way. Haven't you got enough? To rout those men out of their cover might cost us two, three more. I'm bossin' this job an' I'm takin' the responsibility. You chew on that, fella."

This was all true enough; the grumbler said no more. The fact was that none of them was loath to call the deal off; at any rate they had done what they had been sent to do; the firing on the hill after they had gone doubtless had finished Spaulding's flock.

"You men who are not hurt get busy," Rigsby commanded. "One of you ride up the and tell those other fellas to come down here—if they haven't cashed in too. Bring the dead man with you. An' for crissake circle aroun' so you won't get in range of that man-killer at this end back here. I'm goin' now to try to talk some sense in him. Shorty, you come with me."

Rigsby climbed upon his horse and rode slowly back to the mouth of the canyon. Shorty, a Triangle cowboy, rode beside him. A hundred feet from the mass of tumbled boulders which had hidden Blake the two drew rein.

"Ho! you fellas in the rocks!" he hailed.

Blake was still with McFarland. Bruce whispered.

"That's Joe Rigsby, Terry, Compton's foreman. He's white." Terry Blake stepped out into the open, his thumbs tucked into his belt. He called out:

"All right, I hear you.' I'm Blake."

"My name is Rigsby, Blake. Me an' my men have got a bellyfull. I've got one here with me, no more. If you'll let us get the two you shot off their horses a li'l' while ago we'll take 'em with us an' call it a day. Only don't get on the prod when we pass back through the gulch like we have to do."

"That's all I want, Rigsby—that you pull your freight out of here." Blake's stern voice replied. "Go get your men, and I'm hoping that they are only wounded. You can pass by here on your way out without a shot being fired by us unless you start something. But I'm warning you, Rigsby, **don't do that.** When you get back to the Triangle you can tell John Compton that when he paid Dutch Keppinger to murder an innocent boy he overplayed his hand. Now go."

Rigsby started; this was the first he had heard of Dutch Keppinger having killed anyone since he came.

"I'll tell Compton plenty," he muttered grimly, then for Blake's ears: "Much obliged, Blake; we won't start anything. We are the peacefullest cowboys in Lincoln county right

now."

Rigsby and Shorty found the two men; both were dead, as the Triangle foreman had feared. Each took a body before him on the saddle; they rode slowly back to join the other men. The cowboy who had been sent to Spaulding's place came back accompanied by one other man only; each was staggering beneath the weight of a lifeless body. Joe Rigsby groaned, but his capacity for rage was exhausted.

"Spaulding got another, huh?" He added acidly. "Well, tally it against John Compton and Pat O'Hearn."

Minutes later eight sullen cowboys, two of whom were reeling in their seats; four of them carrying their dead comrades across their pommels, retraced their way through the canyon. When they had safely passed the danger point without hearing a sound they drew long breaths, and those that were able to felt for the makings, their nervous systems shrieking aloud for a smoke.

"THERE won't be any more trouble to-night, Pablo." Blake said after the raiders had passed by. "I'll help you get Bruce on his horse and you can take him as easily as you can to the casa and have Rosalia attend to his wound—she is a lot better at it than either of us. Put him to bed and keep him quiet, Pablo. I'm going to the Spaulding House and I'll be back as soon as I can make it."

The late rising moon made objects plainly visible as Terry Blake neared the sheep ranch. He went straight to the house and called out, receiving no reply. He tried the door and it opened at his touch, being ajar. Blake struck a match and lighted a lamp; none of the rooms was in disorder, but all were empty of occupants. Blake's blood chilled in his veins—what had happened to Sally?

Fearfully he made his way to the corral. The light was stronger now and even at a distance he could perceive the lifeless gray shapes of the sheep which littered the corral. He heard his name called and broke into a run; he found Sally sitting cross-legged on the ground in a corner of the corral. Her father's head was pillowed in her lap and beside her was the dead collie. From Terry Blake's lips welled low, venemous curses.

"Pa is dead, Terry." Sally said tonelessly, as one from whom all emotion has been drained.

Blake knelt and felt Spaulding's heart—it had long ceased to beat. He lifted the girl to her feet and crushed her to his bosom in silence. Soon she began weeping softly and the cowboy let her cry it out. After a long time Sally spoke; relating brokenly:

"The men were nearly to the corral when I heard Shep growling and went to the door. One of the men shot the dog and I screamed. Father got his rifle—he killed one man with his first shot, I think: I . . . saw . . . him fall. Pa drove them back, and he would go to the sheep corral. I went with him—Shep had crawled there and died. I pleaded with Pa to go back to the house, but he wouldn't; he wanted to protect the sheep. After some time the men came again and the shooting began all over. Then the firing in the canyon commenced and I knew that you were coming and I was . . . so afraid . . . for you. The men left then and I went back to the corral. I found . . . Pa . . . like this."

Sally made a little pathetic gesture toward the still figure at their feet; Blake felt her shiver. She went on

again:

"I stayed with Pa. Soon two men alone came up the hill. The firing in the canyon began again. I took up Pa's rifle and . . . I killed . . . one of . . . those men, Terry. Oh my God!" She wailed this, then mastered herself. "He wasn't anything but a simple cowboy, Terry, ordered to do his work."

Blake held her tighter, until her breath came in panting gasps from the stricture of his clasp.

"It is done now, sweet," he said gently. "You but protected yourself, as your father did, as I did. Don't grieve about it. As you say, he was but a simple cowboy, as I am, paid to obey orders. Yet he knew the risk he took. The blame and the responsibility rests with his employers—and they shall pay.

"You must be brave now, Sally; I know that this is the beginning. I will be needed at the Casa Verde, dear, and I must hurry back there. But first I want you to go with me to friends in Lincoln, where you will be safe. I dare not take you to the casa. I will bury your father's body on my way back."

"Where will you take me, Terry?"

"To the Montoya home; it is the only place I know."

Sally stiffened in his arms, then her slender frame relaxed. She thought of the terrific responsibility that rested upon the young shoulders of her lover, and she said simply:

"All right, Terry, do what you think best."

Blake kissed her.

THE Spaulding horses were gone, the gate of the horse lot stood wide open. More than half of the Spaulding sheep were dead, the others had fled through the gaps in the corral wall and were now scattered through the uplands, where they would be absorbed, a few here, a few there, into other roving flocks. All sheep look alike.

The early-breaking dawn was at hand. Blake swung the dazed girl to a seat behind him; Redskin had never carried double before, but he conducted himself like the gentleman that he was. At the touch of Blake's spurs he broke into an easy gallop. Smoke was rising from the Montoya house when they reached it.

Carmelita, wearing a silken robe which she had hastily donned, opened the door in response to the cowboy's insistent rapping; her face was pale and wore a strained look. When she saw Blake's haggard eyes and blood stained hands—the blood of Bruce McFarland — she gasped, then stretched her arms toward him.

"Terry, mi—"

Blake instinctively drew back and for the first time Carmelita saw the girl standing in the shadows behind him. She jerked her arms quickly and folded them across her heaving bosom.

"What does thees mean, Terree Blake?" she demanded arrogantly, her expressive gray eyes pools of passion.

"This is Sally Spaulding, Carmelita, my promised wife," Blake said quietly. "Compton's men raided her father's sheep to-night; there was a gunfight and Mr. Spaulding was killed. I brought Sally to you—to ask that you care for her through this trouble."

A thought which was poignant anguish flashed through Carmelita's mind—her letter to Compton had done this! The Mexican girl's lovely face contorted into a grotesque mask from the conflicting emotions which

warred within her. She wavered, but for a moment only, then with a little sighing moan which held regret as well as bitterness, yet which was a final renunciation, she reached out her arms and drew the American girl into her embrace. Sally Spaulding, hardly aware of what she did, went without demur.

"La pobre muchacha," Carmelita murmured to herself, then to Blake: "Of course, Terree, I weel care for her as I would my own hermana. Now, tell me w'at has happen, please."

Blake wisely offered no thanks.

"Sally will tell you, Carmelita. It's a long story and I haven't a minute to spare—I must get back to Casa Verde as soon as I can. We had a fight with the raiders, too, and Bruce McFarland was wounded, so I—"

One of Carmelita's brown hands fluttered to her throat.

"Bruce wounded? Ah-h!"

"Not badly, Carmelita dear," Blake hastened to say. "Rosalia is looking after him and I am sure that he will be all right. There will be more trouble with the cattlemen now and I must be going. Where is Felipe?"

"Felipe ees een Rudiosa, Terree. Will he be needed?"

"Badly—and soon," Blake told her. "Could you get word to him at Rudiosa to gather as many men as possible right away and bring them to the casa? Every hour now counts, Carmelita."

"Then go at once," Carmetlia said, and gave Blake her hand. "You mus' hasten. I weel get word to Felipe. Geeve Bruce my love. Vaga con Dios, Terree Blake." She turned to Sally as Blake left and tilted her chin to look into her eyes. "You are a lucky woman, Sallee Spaulding. I congratulate you."

BECAUSE of his enfeebled condition Don Guadalupe made it a custom to lie late abed, even though he did not sleep. Hence to ensure him quiet he occupied a room in a remote corner of the rambling house. He knew nothing of Terry Blake's visit.

Carmelita led Sally Spaulding to a room, disrobed her with her own hands, and provided her with a filmy night gown. Then she put the half-conscious girl to bed and sat down beside her.

"You are weeth fren's now, Sallee, please know that. You mus' sleep for a long time; I weel seet by you. You fell sleepy, querida?"

Sally nodded drowsily. Completely exhausted from the strain and grief, and from her sleepless night, she fell into fitful slumber almost by the time her head had settled upon the pillow. When she was breathing regularly Carmelita gently withdrew her hand, then tip-toed from the room. Going to her own room she swiftly dressed herself in a riding habit, then went to Dolores, in the kitchen.

"Dolores, I ride to Rudiosa at once. I weel eat breakfast there."

Dolores began a protest, but Carmelita checked her sternly.

"Hush! You weel disturb Don Guadalupe. Thees ees a matter of life and death, Dolores. Much trouble has occurred at the Casa Verde. Miss Sallee Spaulding ees up stairs asleep; her father was slain in a fight weeth sheep raiders. You weel guard her like your own, Dolores, and w'en she awakens provide her weeth food. She weel tell you w'at has happened; I have no time now. I should be back thees afternoon, but I cannot say for sure. Now Adios."

The stable boy was not astir. Carmelita saddled her mare herself. The sun was just rising. The girl mounted

and sped away at a racing gait: she was at Rudiosa at almost the hour Terry Blake reached the casa.

BLAKE stopped at the Spaulding corral. Finding a shovel he scooped out two shallow graves in the corner of the corral, side by side. In one he placed the body of Sally's father, and in the other the gallant collie, Shep. Spaulding would wish it so, he thought. He shovelled in the dirt and piled stones from the corral wall over both graves in a tall heap to protect them from the scavenger beasts of the dark hours. His work ended, the cowboy bared his head and murmured:

"So long, old timer. Sleep well."

And through all the wide spaces of New Mexico, through Arizona, through every state of the wind-swept plains, cairns such as this mark the last dry-camp of hardy pioneers who died unsung, that those who followed in their steps might live.

Blake upon arriving at the casa found that Rosalia had dressed Bruce McFarland's wound with care and skill. The boy had some fever, Rosalia thought, but with care and attention would soon be well.

Blake hardly thought that there would be any reprisals by their foes that day, nor probably the next, for the Triangle had suffered a severe reverse and the cowboys must be rallied. Too, Blake imagined that he would likely send to Pat O'Hearn and Captain Tomlison for reinforcements —Blake was not aware of the fact that O'Hearn was in Lincoln and that some of his men had taken part in the raid. To secure reinforcements from either the Scissors or the Santa Rosa would take time, during which they would be left in peace. But Terry Blake did not delude himself with the thought that the affair might be over; he knew the reputation of these men and their relentless natures—they would be raging at the defeat of the raiding party and would sooner or later attack in greater force and with even greater fury. And that the attack the next time would be directed at the Casa Verde itself Blake was equally certain.

He spent the morning going over the many-roomed house and inspecting its defenses, particularly the doors and slot-like windows. All were in excellent condition, their stout oaken bars as strong as when they were first placed. The sun was past the meridian when Pablo called him to the front gallery.

"Some people come, Senor Blake, from the direction of Rudiosa. I'm theenk it may be Felipe an' some of the sheepmen."

Blake went out upon the gallery. A small, compact group of riders was approaching. The horsemen were far out on the mesa, advancing swiftly. Soon they were near enough for the cowboy to perceive that one was a woman, and when they came further he recognized Carmelita, leading the way. Behind her was Felipe, with three other men, one American, two Mexicans.

Carmelita was off her horse before it came to a full stop; she ran up to Blake.

"Bruce?" she breathed.

Terry Blake restrained a smile.

"He is doing all right, Carmelita," said he gravely. "Come; I'll take you to him."

He led the girl to the room where McFarland lay. The wounded boy was dozing fitfully, tossing in pain. His face was as white as the sheet which covered him, and over the

room hung the nauseous odors of the crude remedies Rosalia had used.

"Oh-h.' " Carmelita's cry was a despairing wail. She crossed the room in a swift movement and fell upon her knees beside the bed; the fingers of one of her hands lightly touched the sick boy's cheek. Mc Farland's eyes opened, widened, and Terry Blake, from his position at the door, heard the girl's passionate whisper.

"Bruce! Querido! I am here; I have foun' my heart at last. Pray the merciful mother that eet ees not too late. Speak to me, Bruce."

Terry Blake closed the door.

"Ola, compadre!" Felipe sang out. "You have a hell of a fight, yes? Pablo, heem tell me about eet. How ees Bruce?"

Blake grinned.

"Bruce—" said he, "is probably feeling better right now than he ever did before in his life. And so is Carmelita, I guess—they are together."

Felipe's eyes widened in surprise, and in them was a trace of disappointment.

"So? How I am fooled!"

Felipe hastened on, as if to avoid the subject.

"Terree, I bring t'ree men weeth me who I can get queeck, an' Eduardo weel sen' more tonight. How many I don' know for sure. Some of theem fella not over their scare yet. You theenk we weel have more trouble?"

"We are certain to have, Felipe; there were four men killed last night; others wounded. That means war to the end. And my belief is that we will have to fight it out here at the casa. If many more men come—and I am counting on it—we will run short of grub. Where, outside of Lincoln, can we get some?"

"I'm already attend to that, Terree. Eudardo ees now loadin' a wagon at hees store. Eet will be here befo' night."

Blake slapped the boy affectionately on the back.

"You are sure a comfort to me, fella." said he. "Now there is another thing we must do at once, Felipe. Compton won't bother us tonight, nor do I think he will tomorrow. But we can't bank on it. So we must get a wagon ready with a mattress in the bed and send Bruce to Lincoln with Carmelita. He must have a doctor. I suppose Pablo will drive the wagon."

Felipe agreed readily.

"Sure, Bruce mus' go een. But I weel drive the wagon myself. I mus', of course, talk weeth Don Guadalupe. An' we weel go now so that I can get back befo' night. Ho, Pablo! come here queeck."

Chapter XX

TO Sally Spaulding the events immediately following her arrival at the Montoya home would always recur with the vexing elusiveness of a dream. She recalled hazily that she had met Carmelita; that she had been conducted to a room, disrobed, and put to bed. Someone—she was quite sure it was Carmelita—sat beside the bed holding her hand. Then nothingness . . .

Sally stirred in her sleep; her body stretched luxuriously beneath the downy covering; her eyes half-opened, fogged with drowsiness; her lips curved in a little smile.

A dazzling ray of sunshine sprayed through an open window, and somewhere just without the window a mocking bird was in full song. The mellow morning breeze was freighted with heady incense, the mixed fragrance of a riot of rival blossoms.

Sally opened her eyes to their widest and her gaze roved wonderingly about the strange room—then with shocking suddenness full recollection returned.

This was the Montoya house. Her father was dead! Terry was in mortal peril! A low wailing cry escaped her lips, but was quickly stifled. She lay silently then, but her body heaved convulsively with her effort at self control.

Bereft of all capacity for further emotion, her eyes were dry; her bitter thoughts quested chaotically. This so fair land . . . breeding in men's hearts unrestrained passions, unholy greed, rapine and murder. How could it be? Sally shook her head, not knowing that the question she had put to herself was one as old as the hills about, and yet unanswered.

Dolores came in. She sat down at the side of the bed, then, not speaking at all, she gathered Sally Spaulding to her capacious bosom and held her tightly, rocking her back and forth as one would a small, hurt child. Presently the tremors of the girl's figure ceased and the duenna laid her back upon the pillow. With a touch as light as a vagrant breath of air she untangled the matted auburn hair and braided it in two long queues. She dampened a towel with water from an olla upon a stand and laved Sally's fevered brow, and her face, dried them and dusted them liberally with Carmelita's pink face powder. After which she leaned back and surveyed her work with placid satisfaction, and for the first time since entering the room she spoke:

"Now you look nize. I am Dolores; I go now to breeng you ver' fine breakfas'."

Sally smiled wanly.

At four o'clock Carmelita, Felipe and Bruce McFarland came. Felipe and Carmelita supported Bruce into the house and put the suffering boy to bed. Carmelita dispatched the houseman for a physician. Felipe closeted himself with Don Guadalupe for the conference he must have before he returned to the casa. And then, at last, Carmelita went into Sally's room for the purpose of unburdenening her soul.

Carmelita de Montoya had been heavy hearted, tormented by an awakened conscience, yet she had found some comfort in the few words that she had with Terry Blake before leaving the Casa Verde, during which he had mentioned that some days ago a man, whom from Sally's description Blake believed to be Burke Rollins, had been at the Spaulding house. The man had been insolent and Keith Spaulding had roughly ordered him to leave. Rollins had gone, mouthing threats. Then, perhaps, thought Carmelita, grasping at a straw, Rollins had caused the raid on Spaulding's sheep. In that poor alibi she had found some measure of relief from an accusing conscience. Innately honest as she was, the proud Mexican girl could not bring herself to the point of confessing her treachery now. Yet she must, at least, make some amends. So she said:

"Sally, I have a confession to make. That w'at I told you at your house the other day—that Terree Blake had asked me to marry heem—was untrue. Not once did he ever make love to me, nor has he treated me other than a dear sister. I was jealous, yes, and dishonest, for I thought that I loved heem. Now you know jus' w'at I am. One more theeng I would say. The one I truly love ees Bruce McFarland, although I did not discover eet until he was so cruelly wounded.

We weel be married w'en thees war is over. Can you fin' eet een your heart to forgeeve me, Salle Spaulding?"

"Of course," said Sally drearily. "There isn't much to forgive. Terry said that we must not judge you so quickly; that it wasn't like you. Any woman would fight for the man she thought she loved. But, Carmelita, it all seems so trifling, so unimportant now. Terry is in such dreadful danger."

Sally's voice broke and the Mexican girl placed an arm about her shoulders.

"Yes, Terree ees een danger," she agreed. "And so ees Felipe een danger, and Bruce even now lies badly wounded. But we can help them more, I theenk, by smiling — they would like eet so. And I feel sure that Terree Blake weel come to no harm."

"You are quite right, Carmelita; we can help them more if we smile," said Sally, and she did smile very, very weekly.

"That ees much better," Carmelita approved. "Then we may be real friends?"

"Always," Sally said, "if you wish it so."

Chapter XXI

AFTER dispatching the raiding party Compton and O'Hearn rode back to Lincoln. The Irishman was his usual jovial self and in high spirits; the sheepmen would be given a salutary lesson and then he would take his buckaroos back to his northern stronghold and let Compton blow the smoke of battle away. It was all in a day's work for O'Hearn. But John Compton was moody and depressed; the reaction from his white-heat of passion had come and he felt, for some unexplained reason, a dismal foreboding. He knew, as Tomlison had said, that the lawless ways of the cattlemen were in strong disfavor with the territorial authorities, and eventually the federal government must take the same position. Though he did not realize it himself, much of his old time ardor had slipped from him with the mounting years. As his depression increased at these unpleasant reflections he muttered through his set teeth.

"Dam sheep!"

Pat O'Hearn heard him and grinned. Compton passed a sleepless night, his anxieties augmented by the non-arrival of Ben Thorpe riding him with cruel rowels. He was up at dawn and about his stables; the sun was but an hour high when he saddled a horse with his own hands and rode to the jail. Buck Scott, the more or less ornamental deputy, was strolling about the jail yard.

"Hey, Buck! Come here," the rancher called, and when Scott came he asked gruffly: "Where is that dam' sheriff? He was to come to my house last night."

"Search me, Mr. Compton," said Buck. "I ain't seen hide or hair of him since he rode outa town day befo' yesterday. Tain't like Ben to stay away overnight." Then he suggested comfortingly: "But I reckon he rode over to Carrizozo on business and got held up there. He'll be showin' up soon."

Compton brooded. He knew Thorpe had not gone to Carizozo, but Blake might not have been at the Casa Verde; he might have gone to Rudiosa and the sheriff had followed him there. Or Thorpe might be hanging around anywhere, waiting for his chance. Or he—

His irritation showed in his voice

as he barked an order at the deputy:

"Well, you stay right here until Thorpe gets back. Don't leave the jail. When Thorpe comes, Buck, tell him that I am at the Triangle and for him to come on out there. You sabe?"

"Sure, Mr. Compton, I'll tell him," Buck drawled." I ain't goin' nowheres; I'll be right busy, 'cause I got a prisoner to feed."

John Compton rode away: his shoulders s a g g e d wearily, his thoughts were sombre ones.

HAD John Compton been able to see the recreant sheriff at that particular moment he would have been even more gloomy. After passing the Casa Verde Thorpe had ridden steadily, but not fast. He had purposely avoided all the small settlements that he had sighted, for he well knew that John Compton was vindictive and that his arm was long. As the sheriff rode, he planned his course; he was a fair cowhand and could hold a job on a cattle ranch, preferably one far off the beaten trail. Well, he would do just that, and there he would stay until Compton had given up the hunt for him.

At dusk Thorpe stopped at a nester's shack and paid a quarter for his supper, then went on his way. At midnight he crossed into Texas, staked his horse in a clump of mesquite, and spread his saddle blanket beneath one. At the first glimpse of dawn he was riding once more. Thorpe did not know this country or anything at all about the ranches hereabouts, but he was confident that he would strike one sooner or later. He had made up his mind that he would take the first job which offered regardless of the compensation, for he had plenty of money and the more he roamed the plainer would be the trail he left. So when an hour later—at about the time John Compton left the jail—he sighted a spread with all the earmarks of affluence he mentally congratulated himself and galloped toward it.

An unusually large number of cowboys were just trooping out of the mess-shack when Thorpe got down from his horse. A tall, lanky man with a quill toothpick between his lips strolled up to him. His eyes were kindly and humorous, but their quick appraisal of the stranger was none the less shrewd.

" 'Lo, stranger," he greeted Thorpe with easy cordiality, "Yuh're just in time; five minutes later yuh'd been outa luck. Shake a leg for the grub-pile and don't waste any time when yuh get there. A few of the boys are still eatin'."

Thorpe accepted the invitation with alacrity. When ten minutes later he emerged from the mess-shack rubbing his stomach the crew was saddling up. The sheriff approached the one who had invited him to breakfast, surmising that he was the foreman of the outfit.

"My name's Jim Brown, pardner," he advised. "I've been workin' with cows in New Mexico. You reckon I might hang my rig up here for a while. You're the foreman, ain't you?"

"Uh-huh. Name's Stell — Archie Stell. We can generally use a hand who knows his business; we are always more or less short-handed way out here. However, I'm startin' out with the crew. Suppose you see the owner, over at the big house."

" 'Sall right with me, Stell," said Thorpe, "as long as I'm not goin' over your head. But I'm a complete stranger hereabouts; I don't know

your boss' name, nor even what spread this is. I'm just driftin'."

The foreman's eyes twinkled.

"Well, that's all right, too, provided that yuh're not driftin' ahead of a posse. The brand is the Triple X and the boss' name is McFarland. If Four-square wants yuh he won't ask for your pedigree, or what your name used to be. Go ahead and good huntin'. I'll see you when I come back."

Angus McFarland was a bearded man of stocky build, so broad that at first glance he gave an indefinable impression of squareness despite his uncommon height. Hence to his riders he was affectionately 'Old Four-square'. Which had a double meaning, for wherever cattlemen assembled Angus McFarland's word was good for all the live stock he wanted to buy. He was square in every sense of the word. Cold and taciturn with his closest friends, reported to squeeze every dollar that passed through his hands, the heart which pulsed within his bosom was rich in affection for his fellow men. Ever a dauntless fighter, he was regarded as a loyal friend and a dangerous foe. His wife had been dead for years.

McFarland's cool, c r i t i c a l eyes dwelt long on Thorpe's face as he was braced for a job; he spoke then with a slight Scottish accent.

"Umph-h. You wish a punching job, do you? Did I understand you rightly to say that your name is Brown? From New Mexico?"

"That's right, cap'n," Thorpe affirmed, "Jim Brown."

McFarland deliberated, carefully tamping short-cut into the bowl of his pipe; his face was slightly frowning. He looked up at Thorpe. He said quietly:

"When a man asks me for a job I expect him to tell the truth. Why did you lie to me, Sheriff Thorpe? I saw you in court in Lincoln a year ago."

THORPE jumped as though a hornet had stung him; his jaw slacked, leaving his mouth gawking open as he stared at the rancher vacantly. McFarland continued to regard him in silent disfavor, and after Thorpe found his voice.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled! Jus' as I was thinkin' I was settin' purty I go an' get bucked off." Thorpe's voice was so lugubrious that McFarland with difficulty suppressed a smile. The quondam sheriff continued in a burst of frankness. "I ain't sheriff no more, Mr. McFarland; that is, I don't reckon I am. I chucked up the job day befo' yesterday; in fact, I'm runnin' away from it."

"Why are you?" M c F a r l a n d queried. "Understand, Thorpe, that I'm not prying into your affairs. You can tell me as little as you wish and go your way; we will forget that we saw you here. But if you stay, you tell me all."

Ben Thorpe told him all.

"The truth is, Mr. McFarland, that I'm runnin' away from a dam sheep war. I know I wasn't much of a sheriff, but I'm human, an' I don't like seein' men killed over nothin' a-tall."

Then, without reserve, he told Angus McFarland everything, glad of the opportunity to unload his woes upon another. And he told his story without favor or predjudice. Of the long persecution of the sheepmen by the cattle raisers; of John Compton and Don Guadalupe de Montoya; of Pat O'Hearn and Captain Tomlison; of the coming of Terry Blake, the slaying of Dutch Keppinger by Blake in reprisal for the murder of his friend. He went further and told of

Blake's charge that the gunman had been hired by Compton. Ben Thorpe came clean with everything—save the purely incidental matter of the looting of the office safe. McFarland heard him through without comment. He meditated for some time before he suddenly asked:

"Do you happen to know my son, Bruce, who works for John Compton, Thorpe?"

"Crisalmighty!" Thorpe ejaculated. An' Bruce is your son! Sure I know him. But he ain't workin' for Compton now, Mr. McFarland. Bruce quit the Triangle the day I left an' I figger he's tied up with the Montoya side. Him an' Felipe Montoya are big friends."

"All right, Thorpe, that squares you with me." McFarland's eyes were bleak. "You can unsaddle and find yourself a berth in the bunkhouse. Stell will be back soon; tell him I want you taken on the crew. The name Brown is all right with me, if you wish to hang on to it. By the way, don't talk about what you have told me before the men. That's all."

"Much obliged, boss."

The ex-sheriff's tone was a grateful one, and had he known how he would doubtless have kowtowed upon leaving.

FOR an hour after Thorpe had gone Angus McFarland sat in brooding immobility. His pipe went out, dangling neglectedly from his hand, the ash dribbling slowly to the floor. The Chinese houseman padded down the hall with his floor mop and peered into the office. McFarland did not see him at all and the Chinese stole away. At last the rancher sat up and shook himself like a retrieving setter fresh from the water does; he went into the dining room and poured himself a stiff drink of Haig & Haig, downed it at a gulp.

At eight o'clock that night the self-exiled sheriff crawled into a bunk with a silent prayer of thanksgiving, wholly indifferent to the evidence of uncommon activity all about him. At that moment Archie Stell was preparing to leave his employer's office, where he had been for more than an hour. McFarland was giving him some final instructions:

"I know that you have picked your men with care, Stell—sixteen beside yourself. Have them take rifles as well as pistols. Don't tell them anything more now than you have already done—only that I will lead them. Should they ask questions you might say that we are taking the rifles because we might meet up with a band of Mescaleros, who are off their reservation, and want to be prepared."

Stell said:

"They haven't asked any questions, Mac, and won't ask any. They know you are going along and that's enough for them. They're gettin' ready now and we can ride at midnight, or before if you say so. I'll see you then, boss."

Instead of the rollicking and boastful bunch of raiders that he had left the night before, John Compton, when he reached the Triangle, found a sullen, dispirited lot of cowpunchers. Joe Rigsby had just saddled a horse preparatory to riding into Lincoln to report to his employer. He met Compton with a long face which told its own story and the rancher read it as he would have done italicized print. He addressed Rigsby with restraint:

"Didn't go so well, huh?"

"Well, that depends on how you

look at it." Rigsby's drawl was ominously calm. "We beefed most of Spaulding's sheep and turned out the balance. And I've got a hunch the old man himself won't give you any more trouble, although I'm not sure about that. However, I wouldn't wanta go aroun' braggin' about last night—we've got four corpses in the house and maybe a couple comin' up."

"What?" Compton shouted, jarred out of his composure. "You mean to tell me that Spaulding killed four of our men?"

"No, Spaulding tallied only one before we put him out of the action—I guess he come to after that long enough to pull the trigger of his Sharps, 'cause we found another Triangle man plum' stiff later. But what whipped us was that some other fellas come to Spaulding's help an' holed-up in the canyon below us. They began peckin' at our flashes, so there was nothin' to do but rout 'em out or go home draggin' our tails. We routed 'em—in a pig's eye."

"When we got our hawsses an' charged 'em they flopped two of us before we laid eyes on 'em, and shot up a couple more for good measure. If we hadn't been moving so fast they'd laid us all in a row like ninepins. There was only three of 'em, but I've got a hunch that there was one who didn't need any help a-tall—his name, he told me hisself, is Blake. He sent you a message, but I don't reckon you'd be int'rested."

The foreman's sarcasm was lost on John Compton; his face was mottled and he almost strangled with rage. By slow degrees he brought himself back to near-normal, yet still his body trembled and his huge hands were knotted into quivering fists. He stood silently, thinking.

THEN Blake had either killed the sheriff or Ben Thorpe had reneged on him. Compton instinctively accepted the latter theory, thereby paying unwitting tribute to his arch enemy. For Compton's flashing thought was that had the Texas cowboy slain Thorpe, he would have brought, or sent, the sheriff's remains into Lincoln. But in the greater trouble he dismissed the sheriff's probable defection without a second thought.

The die was now cast—he would clean up Blake and all his mangy clan, including the Montoya tribe, if he went to the pen for it. He was sure that O'Hearn would stick; regarding Tomlison he had doubts. But, then, Tomlison was not at hand; he would learn only what he, Compton, would tell him by messenger and would doubtless send men. A though struck Compton suddenly.

"Were all the men killed from the Triangle, Rigsby?"

"Nope; it was a fifty-fifty break—two of yours and two of Pat's."

Compton brightened. That would put it up to O'Hearn, and he knew the fighting old Irishman.

"All right, Rigsby." John Compton's iron jaw thrust out. "We'll collect the toll muy pronto. Send a man into town for O'Hearn; he is at the Harley House. I am going into the office to write a note to Captain Tomlison. Have a messenger to take it by the time I am through."

"Sorry, Compton," Joe Rigsby's voice held an edge. "I'm not giving orders to the Triangle men any more. After I had a talk with them corpses a while ago I quit."

John Compton's capacity for clamorous rage was exhausted, but the venom in his quiet tone when he replied was even more menacing.

"Quit, have you, Rigsby? Did you figure that I would beg you to stay? I'm giving you half an hour to get your cowardly self off this ranch, you yellow cur."

"I'm goin' in less than half an hour, Compton." Rigsby's voice was fully as dangerous as that of his employer. "Bein' as I've worked for you seven years I'll pass that up this time. But I wouldn't advise you to let there be another—**you haven't got any Dutch Keppinger's no more.**"

He turned his saddled horse, swung a leg over the cantle, and jogged toward Lincoln. John Compton watched him out of sight as a man in a trance. He shook himself out of it, and his old face was like a death-mask.

"Hey, you men!" he called to a group of idling cowboys. "I want Burke Rollins—where is he?"

"Comin', boss" Rollins yelled from the mess-shack where, with unwonted license, he was dallying over his breakfast.

Chapter XXII

PAT O'Hearn arrived at the Triangle before ten o'clock. When advised of the casualties among his men he was as bitterly vengeful as was John Compton.

"By the eternal gods, I'll clean the omadhouns from the face of the earth." he stormed, with clenched and uplifted fists. "I'm sendin' a man to the Scissors forninst for another twenty buckaroos. They'll murder Pat O'Hearn's lads, will they? Devil a bit, and get away with it."

"We can't wait for that, O'Hearn," Compton told him. "It would take four days to get word to the Scissors and your men back here. Meanwhile, Blake might get together twice that many. Right now the Mexican sheepers are shaking in their boots, but let four days pass without us making a move, while the word of the licking we took last night spreads around, they will flock to Blake by the score. And they'll fight if cornered. Besides, Guadalupe Montoya has likely already sent a messenger to Fort Sumner, and when Miller learns that men have been killed he will send troops.

"However, we will have as many men as we could use if Tomlison sends the number I've asked him for. You have four men in good shape and I think that I can round up a dozen or more who won't scare easy. I've sent to Tomlison for twelve—and, by God! he had better come through. That will give us more than enough if we strike at once. But, O'Hearn, we will have to lead them ourselves. Joe Rigsby, the rat, has quit on me and he has already given my men something to think about. The Casa Verde is like a fort, make no mistake about that. It will be a hard nut to crack and we will have to be there. Are you game to do it, Pat?"

Pat O'Hearn glowered at his companion.

"And when did you get the idea that you are a better man than me, John Compton. I'll pull the walls of the casa down wid me own hands, if it must be. Game! To hell wid ye."

Compton's quick smile was an apology; he had achieved his purpose in baiting the Irishman. He slapped O'Hearn on the back.

"You'll dam' well have plenty of chance to show how good you are, you bloody old pirate. Anyhow, we'll see it through together, as we have done before."

Compton's courier to the Santa Rosa rode fast, as he had been told to do. He was back before sunset

with a verbal reply to the letter he had taken. Tomlison never put anything of an incriminating nature in writing. Captain Tomlison was ill, the courier reported, so that it was impossible for him to come in person, but he was sending ten men that night, all that he could spare from important work. The captain sent word, however, that he thought it unwise to permit them to start before dusk, as they might be seen and suspicion aroused. Further, the Santa Rosa owner, discreetly providing an alibi, impressed upon the messenger his conviction and understanding that the assembly of men at the Triangle was but a precaution in the event of an attack by the aroused sheepmen, and that he was opposed to all offensive action. Still, he casually added, his men would be instructed to obey all orders given them by the Triangle owner, regardless of what those orders might be.

When he had digested Tomlison's lengthy message by the courier Pat O'Hearn roared in laughter.

"Now ain't he the canny old fox, John?" he queried in open admiration.

"No," growled Compton, "he's a snake in the grass and I've always known it. Never mind, we want only his men. Tomlison would run like a scared wolf if Blake pulled a pop-gun on him. But I'll bet a dollar against a thin dime that I get it back on him before the year is out."

Compton and O'Hearn counted up. There were the four Scissors men, seasoned warriors all. John Compton had succeeded without great difficulty in rallying sixteen, and they also were trusted men. He still had a number in reserve should they be needed. Compton had talked to his crew seriously, for he knew that Joe Rigsby's defection would have a discouraging effect on the men. He advanced the specious argument that their jobs were at stake; that if the sheep were not taken care of now the great free-range would eventually be ruined for cattle raising and the big cattle ranches would disappear. Thus he inflamed them anew. He informed them frankly that an attack on the Casa Verde was being planned, not directed at Don Guadalupe de Montoya, but against the gunman he had hired, who was at the bottom of all the discontent. He wound up by promising that every man who accompanied him to the Casa Verde would draw double pay while so engaged. And then he appealed to their loyalty and craftily called for volunteers. Every member of the Triangle crew had promptly responded. Compton selected sixteen only, stating that he did not want to leave the spread undefended.

THE two embattled old cronies were well content. When Tomlison's ten men came they would have a fighting force of thirty, besides themselves. If Tomlison sent his men.

Tomlison did send them. They showed up at the Triangle at ten o'clock, ten in number in addition to their leader, a burly, black-whiskered cowhand, who looked every inch an outlaw. Compton had Burke Rollins bring them to his office. They listened to the Triangle owner's candid statement of the peril with complete indifference, but they pricked up their ears at the mention of a bonus. Tomlison had said nothing about that. Their ruffian-like leader spoke for them with commendable brevity:

"We ain't passin' up no bonus, Compton, if there's any handed around. But bonus or not, Tomlison

sent us to take your orders. We are takin' them."

"That's good enough," said Compton. "And you'll get the same bonus my own men will get; if Tomlison won't pay it, I will. Now you'd better hit the hay, for you won't get any sleep tomorrow night. You'll have to pile up in the house here, because the bunk house is so full its falling apart. There's three or four double beds and plenty of blankets in a closet at the end of the hall. Get 'em yourselves, and I'll send you a quart of bourbon to help you go to sleep.

"There's but one order I'm givin' you now. Don't a man of you leave the ranch tomorrow, and if anyone who Burke Rollins don't know comes this way lay low until he shoves off. That's all. Buenas noches, companeros."

"Suppose we chin-chin awhile, Pat, before we turn in." Compton suggested when the men had gone. "I have an idea I want to talk to you about. Like I told you, the walls of the Casa Verde are four, five foot thick. There are only two doors, front and back, and they're built of solid oak and have bars on the inside as thick as your arm. The windows are so narrow that no man could squeeze through them. I've been in the old house many times and I know it like a book. My first idea was to pour in so hot a fire at the windows that some of our men might get up with a wagon-pole and smash in a door. But the other fellas will be doing some shootin' and those dam doors won't smash easy. So I've thought of something else.

"The walls are thick, but they are adobe. There's an old codger in Lincoln, Pat, who was a gunner in Grant's army. He worked around my house in town for a year or more, then I set him up in business with a little gun-shop in town. He's been doin' all right. He knows all about explosives. My idea is to have him fix us up some kind of a bomb that will break the walls. Do you suppose that he could do it?"

"Of course he can if he knows about powder," O'Hearn said. "I could almost do it myself, given the materials. I think that if he will take a powder canister, fill it with black powder tamped down good and hard, with a fuse sticking out at one end you would have a bomb that would do the trick. The man will know how to make one, sure. And its a damn good idea, Compton. We can force the sheepers away from the windows plenty long enough for a man to place it against a wall and light the fuse. It'll blow a hole through a 'dobe wall we can drive a cow through." O'Hearn yawned widely. "Let's go to bed, John—I played stud 'til almost mornin'."

"There's no hurry, Pat; have another drink. Then we'll have my man out here tomorrow. No, I'll go into town and have the bombs made in his shop and bring 'em out myself. I'll have to go in anyway and attend to some business. I guess you'll want to go in, too.

"I want to bring Buck Scott out with me—he's acting sheriff. Buck won't be worth a plugged nickel to take along with us, but I'll have him swear our men in as a posse to arrest Blake, which will make it look legal anyway. I think that we had better leave here around ten o'clock tomorrow night, because going over the prairies, so as to avoid Lincoln, it will take us about three hours to get to the casa. There's one more thing, Pat. We will have to . . . **Well, I'll be damned!**" A subdued snore had in-

terrupted his monologue — Pat O'Hearn was fast asleep. Compton got to his feet, a disgusted expression on his face. Then he laughed and shook O'Hearn gently.

"Come along, you old stable bum; I'll tuck you in bed."

AT dusk Felipe returned from the trip to Lincoln with Bruce McFarland and Carmelita and he brought news. When Don Guadalupe had been told by Sally of the attack on the Spaulding place and of the death of five men he had immediately dispatched a courier to Colonel Miller at the fort, explaining the situation fully, emphasing its gravity, and flatly demanding that a troop of cavalry be sent at once. Don Montoya believed that they now would be sent.

However, the only messenger with whom he cared to intrust the important communication was an elderly man who could hardly make the ride under two days, and the soldiers would hardly arrive for another twenty four hours. Should the cattlemen delay their expected attack for three or four days the troops might arrive in time; otherwise Blake and his men must fight, striving to stand their assailants off for as long as possible. Don Guadalupe, said Felipe, had little doubt that the cattlemen would reason the same as he did, and that if an attack on the casa was made at all, it would be at once.

Felipe had been about the town and reported that all Lincoln was talking of the double killing of young Rand and Dutch Keppinger, and that public sentiment was strongly with Blake. Sam Hunt had given it out that Rand was a pleasant, inoffensive boy, while every one knew Keppinger as a professional murder. Few connected that affair with the rumored war between the stockmen and the sheepmen. No word had as yet reached Lincoln of the fight in the canyon, as far as Felipe could learn. Some of Felipe's friends who were scouting for him reported that all appeared to be quiet at the Triangle, but that there seemed to be an unusual number of cowboys about the place. Also that Compton and O'Hearn were both there.

During Felipe's absence three recruits had arrived at the Casa Verde; during the night others drifted in one or two at a time. Checking up at breakfast Blake found that he had fifteen men to defend the casa if attacked. Nearly half of them were white; friends of Keith Spaulding and grim resolute fighters, eager to avenge his death. The Mexican recruits were good men also, and were quietly purposeful, determined to resist their old time foes to the last.

With himself, Felipe and Pablo the defending force Terry Blake had assembled numbered eighteen. There were fewer Mexicans than he had expected; some were afraid to come, Felipe said. Yet Blake was fairly content. No doubt Compton would bring many more than eighteen, but the old casa would not offer an easy target for an offensive force. Blake thought that he could hold the cattlemen off, at least until the soldiers came—the outlook, though gloomy, was far from being hopeless.

Terry Blake set about the disposition of his forces. He assigned a man to each of the windows, placing the seven white men, Pablo and himself at the front and rear of the house where the doors opened—Blake did not see how an entrance into the casa could be made elsewhere. Felipe was given a roving commission, to keep the Mexicans on the alert and to

carry word from side to side of the great patio. The Mexican sheepmen were placed at the side windows with orders to not expose themselves unnecessarily, but to keep up a constant fire from the embrasures to prevent the attackers from winning to the walls.

Rosalia, with an impassive countenance but an anxious heart, was going quietly about her own preparations like the veteran she was. She had overhauled her scanty store of remedies for gun shot wounds and was now ripping bed sheets into strips for use as bandages.

Two men had been told off to aid her when the battle began, and to keep those on the firing line supplied with ammunition. All of the cartridge boxes, of which there appeared to be an abundant supply, had been opened and the contents arranged by calibre. Most of the men had Winchester rifles, supplied by Eduardo Montoya. All had been cautioned to avoid killing when possible; to fire to cripple instead.

More the young Texan could not do. He sat down upon the front steps of the casa to wait and watch, morose and irritable because of the heavy responsibility resting upon his inexperienced shoulders, yet anxious for the battle to start, if they must have one. And he was filled with an unshakable conviction that they must.

The hours dragged, the sun crept across the skies, went down at last in a blaze of crimson—blood red, Blake fancied. The night donned its royal mantle of purple, dusted with gold. Pablo called Blake in to supper. The cowboy strained his eyes in a last sweeping gaze; all was the same, the levels as far as he could see were bare of human presence.

Chapter XXIII

TEN o'clock, eleven o'clock, midnight; still the prairies slumbered. Terry Blake was like a caged tiger tirelessly making its rounds. He lighted a cigaret and strolled to the gate of the fence enclosing the grounds of the house. His nerves were as taut as steel cables, he started at each remote sound, yet he was alert and watchful. The moon still shone brightly, but was fast sliding down to the mountains.

All at once Blake's head went up in a listening attitude, he ceased his restless pacing to and fro. He could not say that he had heard a sound, but he **felt** something. After a moment he lay flat upon the ground with an ear to the sod. He turned over, listening with the other ear. And now he heard, far away yet unmistakable, the beat of galloping hooves. He remained prone for a full minute longer to assure himself that his hearing was not playing him false he arose and went unhurriedly back to the house. All the tenseness, all the nervous constraint had instantly left him. The time had come and he welcomed the relief.

"Men, they are coming," he informed the others calmly. "Take your positions. I will challenge them myself. No one must show himself, or fire, until I give the word."

His men obeyed in grim silence. Blake went to the rear door to see that its stout bar was in place, then he took up his rifle and returned to the front gallery. Now the beat of hooves was like the roll of a kettle drum, and over a rise swept a body of horsemen, clearly visible beneath the light of the moon. Blake caught his breath with a gasp, for there appeared to be a host of them; fully

thirty, he swiftly estimated.

When the approaching riders were two hundred yards distant he dropped the rifle across a forearm and fired a warning shot—the horsemen came on without pause, increasing their speed. And now the cowboy took aim to send a volley of leaden missiles hissing close above their heads. The ranks broke then, the riders milled confusedly, came to a full stop.

Two figures detached themselves and rode on slowly, each holding one hand high above his head. But Blake saw the play of the moon-rays upon the barrels of the rifles they carried across their laps. Standing well back in the shadows of the porch he waited stilly. The two men were nearly to the fence when he made his challenge, his voice breaking the dead silence with the startling abruptness of a striking alarm clock.

"**Whoa, hombres!** That's near enough. Do your talking."

The riders halted. An impassioned voice demanded:

"Who the hell are **you,** giving orders? This is a sheriff's posse, fella. We've come to arrest a man named Blake for murder. You get **that?"**

Blake recognized John Compton's voice.

"So?" he drawled: "Then you must be Sheriff Thorpe. Get down and come on in, Sheriff; we'll talk it over. I'm Blake."

"Like hell we'll come in!" Compton shouted hoarsely: "You come out and give yourself up, Blake. If you don't we'll come then, and come a shootin'. There's no talkin' over to it, by God!"

Terry Blake's voice lost its drawling cadence; it rang out as harshly as the rancher's had.

"You are wasting your time, John Compton. You don't want me for murder. We all know what you're here for—**get on with it, damn you."**

WITH his last word Blake flung himself prone upon the floor, for his keen eye sight had caught the glint of a lifting rifle barrel. Barely in time. From the weapon of Compton's companion, Burke Rollins, came a spit of fire; a slug crashed into the wall where the cowboy had stood a moment before. Blake scrambled for the door upon his hands and knees, another bullet smashing into the adobe wall near his head. The door swung open; Pablo dragged him to safety.

A rifle spat from a window of the casa; Ed Hodges, an old frontiersman, enraged by Rollins' treacherous act, had disregarded Blake's instructions and had got busy. The whang of of the rifle was answered by the shrill scream of a horse in pain; Burke Rollins' mount reared and bolted, then fell broadside, sending its rider flying over its head. Rollins leapt to his feet and sprinted, zig-zagging from side to side as Hodges' bullets buzzed by his ears like angry hornets. John Compton, too, wheeled his horse and sped to the rear crouched low in his saddle; a ball from the frontiersman's weapon flirted the Stetson from his head. When he reached the flying Rollins, Compton slowed his horse; the panic stricken man grasped the pommel of his employer's saddle and swung behind him in a flying leap.

"Back, O'Hearn, back!" Compton yelled to a horseman who was intrepidly charging to his relief, his followers some distance behind him, but coming also. At Compton's cry Pat O'Hearn swung in a wide circle and his cowboys followed, their flight

speeded by a rain of lead from every front window in the casa, aimed purposely high. The raiders drew together well out of rifle range and Pat O'Hearn chuckled:

" 'Tis a hot time we'll have in the old town to-night, I'm thinkin'. Where were you going in such a hurry, John, when I rescued you?"

"Rescue nothing!" Compton snorted. "I came back just to stop you, you damned old fool, or you would have been as full of holes as a colander by now. O'Hearn, we've got to do some talking together."

" 'Tis my idea that shootin' will be more convincin' to yon tarriers than talkin'," Pat O'Hearn countered dryly. "But it's all right with me. Let's talk whilst the boys' nerves are steadyin'."

He and Compton drew aside in thoughtful seriousness. For ten minutes they conversed, then returned and divided their men into four groups, each in charge of an appointed leader.

"Now, men, O'Hearn and I have made a plan," Compton told the cowboys. "We see now that it will not do to try to storm that dam' fort. Or to batter a door in either. They have too many guns in there; more than we expected. But in a couple of hours, or so, when the moon goes down we will show you a way to get into the house.

"Meanwhile we will surround the casa and pour a steady fire in at every window. We are sure to get some of Blake's men and when the time comes we'll rush the balance. Now some of you take cover in the barn and outbuildings; the others lie down behind clumps of grass or sage brush. Keep at a distance and use your rifles; don't slack your fire for a minute; keep 'em busy.

"O'Hearn and I will stay here near the horses—not to keep out of danger, but to take care of any of our men who may be hit by a bullet. If a man is wounded, the next man to him will bring him to us. When the time comes for hot work Pat and I will be out in front."

The men knew that was true; none questioned the courage of either of their leaders. Thirty-one strong, they scattered to their posts. Casa Verde stood stark and gray in the waning moonlight; each aperture that was a window loomed in black relief against the weathered walls as the bullseye of a target.

WITHOUT warning to the defenders a circle of fire belted the old house; the attackers had let loose their first crashing volley. And with portentious effect, for Felipe, incautiously crowded into a window next to Terry Blake, fell back with a stifled cry. Blake ran to his side, catching him in his arms.

"Felipe?"

"Eet ees nothin', Terree," Felipe gamely panted. "Onlee a bullet een my shoulder, I theenk. I'm fool for to expose myself; I get w'at I deserve."

Blake ripped the shirt from the boy's body in his acute anxiety. But it was as Felipe had thought; the lead had passed through the flesh of his shoulder without striking a bone, the cowboy judged. Blake called Pablo, who agreed with him that the wound was probably not serious. Felipe was turned over to Rosalia—patient number one for her improvised hospital.

The first casualty, Blake reflected gloomily. If at the raider's first volley one of the casa's defenders was lost how long would they hold out? He made the rounds of the windows

to again caution the men to stand well aside from the loop-holes when not firing themselves.

The fire from without was continuing without a moment's cessation, slowly but steadily. The defenders were replying shot for shot, aiming at the flashes from the foe's weapons. Every window in the Casa Verde blazed its message of defiance, as they had done oft before.

"There are more of 'em than I counted on, Pat," Compton said thoughtfully to O'Hearn.

"And you will observe that they shoot straight," O'Hearn replied, pointing to a cowboy who staggered toward them half-dragging a wounded companion. Compton swore vehemently as he groped in a saddle-pocket for a medical kit.

"Make the rounds, Pat, and tell those dumb waddies to find cover before they start firing."

"And where will I be after findin' cover whilst I'm makin' the rounds?" O'Hearn questioned testily.

However, he sauntered off into the murk puffing with vigor at his pipe, unmindful of the betraying glow from its bowl.

The attack settled to a siege; the moon left slowly, as if reluctant to relinquish its vantage point of observation. The Compton men kept up a rattling fire, those within the casa returning it monotonously. Several of the defending party wore bloody bandages over headwounds generally caused by flying chips of mortar from the window casings, but none had been gravely wounded. Thus far Felipe's hurt was the most serious of all. But some were incapacitated for immediate fighting and the eyes of the Mexicans were beginning to hold an affrighted look. Terry Blake made the rounds again. Two or three of the others had been slightly injured, but were still at their posts, as determined as ever. Yet the roster of the garrison of the casa had been reduced by a third; only twelve were fit for fighting should they be immediately rushed. This was what Blake feared, and he shook his head despondently.

Yet, had he known it, the raiding party was in almost as bad shape. One man had been mortally wounded, Compton and O'Hearn thought. Two others were less seriously hurt and others had painful scratches. John Compton was white with fury. Said he:

"I think its about time, don't you, Pat? It's dark enough now."

O'Hearn nodded an affirmative.

"I'll get the boys in, John, while you make ready."

BLAKE was peering out a window —the night was perceptibly darkening. He called Pablo to his side.

"I think this is what they are waiting for, Pablo. The moon is about gone and in fifteen or twenty minutes it will be dark. Then they will probably rush us and try to smash in a door. Make a round and tell the men to keep a sharp lookout from the windows next to the doors."

Pablo left on his errand; the Texan resumed his watch, straining his eyes through the opaque gloom. The desultory firing from without had almost entirely ceased. Pablo came back and went to his window. The minutes dragged. Blake fidgeted uneasily.

"I wonder what's keeping them, Pablo?" he said irritably. "In another hour it will be daylight and then . . ."

BOOM! CRA-SH! The blank wall at his left buckled suddenly inward,

tottered, then toppled toward him. Blake and Pablo sprang back in the nick of time. A mass of crumbling adobe shattered into powder at their feet, filling the room with a cloud of choking dust. Through a ragged hole in the wall Blake saw the flash of a rifle in the distance; a bullet sang through the rift and thudded into the wall at his rear.

"Here men! Quick!" Blake roared. "Pablo, help me set this bureau against that hole. **Pronto**! Those men will be pouring through it in another minute."

In response to their leader's cry, men came running from all parts of the house. Blake and Pablo were striving frantically to place the massive piece of furniture over the breach in the wall. Willing hands aided them; the bureau almost closed the gaping rift.

"Out now!" Blake shouted. "Into the patio with your short guns ready —there may be another."

As though in answer a second bomb exploded, hurtling the heavy dresser straight at him. And now the gap in the wall was man-high and twice as broad. Through it the fast breaking dawn filtered grayly. Blake's men were crowded into the patio.

"All right, boys," the Texan grated. "They're asking for it. Pablo, you and Hodges come to the far side of the patio with me—get behind posts. There's but one way for them to come at us; through that hole in the wall **and this door.** Three of us can stop them. All of you other men get back to your positions; don't come until you hear me call. **Jump to it now! They're coming."**

The Compton men were coming, yelling like Apaches on the warpath. Amid a haze of dust and smoke which billowed in from the devastated room burst a giant of a man; he hesitated uncertainly at sight of the deserted patio; the pistol in his hand wavered about.

With deadly, painstaking aim Blake shot Pat O'Hearn down.

When the second bomb exploded, John Compton, true to his word, led the run for the breached wall. But with the instinct of a true commander he had slowed up to look back and check upon this followers. For a second of time only, but in that brief interval valiant old Pat O'Hearn had jumped into the lead with two of his own men. Thus he had drawn Blake's first deadly bullet.

The two O'Hearn men halted involuntarily at the fall of their leader, then John Cmpton loomed in the narrow doorway behind them. Ignoring the two cowboys, Blake fired again; Compton's body jerked as if from a blow. Pablo and Hodges were shooting now, aiming to cripple only, as Blake had told them to do. A bullet stung a Scissors man who was in front; he screeched and whirled about, s c r a m b l i n g to get back through the door.

"Le'me outa here, dammit!" he clamored. "There's a crazy man loose in here. He's shot Pat to hell and gone an' I'm hit. Le'me out, I tell you."

The panicked cowboy could have said nothing more calculated to strike terror into the hearts of the men behind him. A tall Scissors man peered over his companion's shoulder and saw the body of Pat O'Hearn lying stilly upon the foot-hollowed tiles of the patio floor. He saw the blood streaming from a gash in his comrade's neck.

"Get going, Monte!" he yelled. "I'm coming along."

The panic was complete—as one man the raiders surged back through the break in the wall, carrying John Compton, wounded himself but cursing them at every breath, with them. Once outside the casa the cattleman realized the peril of their exposed position and followed his stampeded men out of range.

Blake, Pablo and Hodges ran back to the hole in the wall. Through it they saw the cowboys running for the shelter of the stables, but Compton, scorning to hasten his step, plodded slowly toward the wounded men he had left upon the rise. His right arm dangled helplessly at his side. Not a man of Blake's was firing now at the fleeing cowboys; it was as if a sudden armistice had been declared.

"Well, that will hold 'em for awhile." There was no note of triumph in Terry Blake's voice. "But they'll be back. Pablo, you and Hodges try to plug up that hole in the wall. I want to get Rosalia and look after O'Hearn."

Chapter XXIV

JOHN COMPTON found that his wound, although painful, was not serious. Blake's bullet had passed through the fleshy part of his shoulder without injuring a bone or muscle. Damned lucky, that, the rancher thought, then his eyes grew speculative at the recollection that the wound was identical with the one Jake Hall had drawn in El Palacio. Like a grizzly bear licking its hurts, Compton took stock.

His men were now all assembled about him on a knoll several hundred yards from the casa where they were out of rifle range, but still within striking distance. One of them he feared was dying. Two were sorely wounded and several others bore scars of battle. But these latter could be fixed up to fight again when called upon. His force was crippled, it was true, but his fighting strength was not vitally impaired. The thought of abandoning his plans occurred to the Triangle owner, but his violent, blasting anger had given way to cold, implacable rancor directed principally at Terry Blake—the fight with the sheepman was but a side issue now.

Suddenly he thought of Pat O'Hearn. John Compton bore an affection for his long-time comrade of which he himself was hardly aware. He called the Scissors man, whose neck was bandaged up.

"Monte, you said that Pat O'Hearn was shot to pieces. Do you mean that he was killed?"

"Come to think of it, Compton, Pat mighta not have been dead." Monte's face wore an abashed look. "But I betcha he wasn't far from it; he wasn't kickin' any. I'm plenty ashamed of myself, all right. But hell, Compton! Them fellas held every ace in the deck; that joint has two outsides anyhow—when you break into one you hafta break into another again.

"That's true, Monte." Compton spoke quietly. "You've put your finger on the sore spot. It's my own fault. I went at it too fast. I knew all about the patio, but I didn't think; we should have blown in the walls on two sides at once. And that's what we'll do next time; I have more bombs.

"First I want all you men able to do so to stand in line."

The cowboys, curious to know what was in the wind, lined up. Compton resumed, and now his voice held a wistful, troubled note.

"I don't want any of you boys killed, and there's some already bad hurt. I might call this fool stunt off

if Pat O'Hearn hadn't been shot down. But now I'm goin' through with it if it takes every dollar I've got. The man who shot Pat is in the casa—**I'm goin' to get him.**

"But I'm not orderin' a single one of you to stick; all who want to go back to the Triangle step forward a pace. There won't be any hard feelings and if things go right with me here you'll stay on my payroll—Pat's men, too, if he's dead. It's up to you."

Compton waited . . . seconds elapsed . . . not a man stepped from his place. One of the badly wounded men called out:

"Hey! One of you cowpokes drag me up into that line."

Compton's old eyes glowed, he exclaimed:

"By God! If you men had been with Bowie the whole dam' Mexican army couldn't have taken the Alamo."

Then he snapped his orders.

"Rollins! I want you to ride hell-bent-for-election to the Triangle. Get together all the men you can find; strip the ranch. Bring 'em back here with you. Hitch a couple of mules to a wagon and bed it with straw. Then load it with cooked grub and that big medicine chest in my office. Have a man drive the wagon and you stay right alongside it until it reaches here—I'll send the wounded back in it. Keep your mouth buttoned up; don't say a word about what has happened here, only that I need all my men. While you're gone we'll hold the fort; not a man will go in or out of the casa. Now get a move on, Rollins. You'd better not fall down on this.

"I won't fall down, boss," Burke Rollins said importantly. "I'll bring 'em if I have to haul 'em by the hair."

THE SUN rose dull and murky, as if seen through smoked glass. After a while it grew hot and Compton rigged saddle blankets on the muzzles of rifles as a shade for the wounded men; the other cowboys stewed and squirmed beneath the burning rays. There was no water; every drop in the canteens swinging from the few saddles had been exhausted, most of it going to the feverished men who were hurt. Compton stroked his chin thoughtfully, looking toward the stables.

"I believe we might circle around and make the barn, boys, to get out of this sun," said he. "There we would have shade and water, besides hay for the sick men to lie on and some to feed the horses. Let's try it. When it cools off we will come back here."

His men eagerly agreed. Some mounted, taking the wounded men in their arms, the other cowboys leading their horses. In a circuitous course they approached the barn from the rear. Not a shot was fired at them. Terry Blake saw them move and surmised their purpose. He told Pablo, who was with him.

"Let 'em go, Pablo. They have wounded men, and it's hot as blazes in the sun. Go tell the men to hold their fire."

Pablo had an old spy-glass at the casa. Through it Terry Blake had observed every move of the party on the knoll. When at first Compton lined up his men he was at a loss to know what it meant, but when Burke Rollins mounted his horse and raced away in the direction of the Triangle Blake knew. Compton had been haranguing his men for some purpose, and now Rollins was going for reinforcements. Blake had hoped that with O'Hearn gone the raiding party

might withdraw to the Triangle, at least for a while, during which he himself might secure recruits. But Compton had been too wily to do that.

Blake was disappointed, but nonetheless the temporary respite was a welcome one.

Compton could not possibly get more men back until late in the night, meanwhile he could repair his own damages. Possibly a few Mexicans might drift in to help him after dusk. Blake went about the task of setting his house in order.

At noon a brisk prairie breeze blew out of the east, cooling the atmosphere magically. None of Compton's wounded men had died. In fact, with water and shade they appeared to all be mending. Those who had been stung by bullets were all right again, ready for the battle. But all of them were famished; they had not had a bite to eat for some eighteen hours.

Leaving a man to care for the wounded, Compton led the others, by the same route they had followed in coming, back to the vantage point on the knoll. He had the same thought as Blake—that help for the defenders of the casa might steal in after dark and he was determined to prevent it.

His cowboys, rejuvenated by their rest in the shade and by copious draughts of water, tightened their belts over their empty stomachs and went willingly, if not with eagerness.

They had not been at their posts an hour when Compton suddenly started, staring fixedly across the prairies to the east. Silhouetted against the sky line a mile or more away there had appeared a band of horsemen. They rode in columns of four at a bouncing trot, like cavalrymen. They were coming straight toward the party on the knoll.

"Soldiers, by gosh!" exclaimed a cowboy.

John Compton shaded his eyes from the rays of the sun and gazed long and steadily.

"No, they're not soldiers," he finally announced. "They are coming from the wrong direction for one thing, and they're not in uniform. They are cowboys, I think, but get your rifles."

At practically the same moment Terry Blake, standing in the front door of the casa, saw the squad of riders. He called Pablo to him and pointed.

"Look, Pablo!"

Pablo looked, his eyes widened.

"Nombre de Dios!" he ejaculated. "Eet ees all up weeth us, Señor Blake. Theem men are cowboys, an' from that direction they can come onlee from the Santa Rosa. I'm theenk Tomlison sen' help to John Compton."

Blake sucked in his breath with a hissing noise.

"'Sta buena, compadre. Go tell the men to get ready—and this time shoot to kill."

THE COMPANY was headed toward Compton and his crew, but when a quarter of a mile away it veered abruptly and made straight for the Casa Verde. Terry Blake went into the house and returned to the gallery with a rifle in his hand. When almost to the casa the riders halted, and John Compton, intently watching, surmised that the Texas cowboy had shouted a challenge. A man who rode at the head of the column held aloft a white handkerchief and went on alone. Blake set his rifle down and came to meet him at the fence. After a brief parley the man with Blake turned and waved to his men, whereupon they continued on to join him.

The leader dismounted and accompanied Blake into the casa; the unknown riders lolled lazily in their saddles, but Compton could discern that rifles lay across their laps, ready for immediate use.

John Compton was puzzled, and he was uneasy. That these men were cowboys was evident, but from where they came he could not hazard a guess. Judging from their numbers and their superior equipment they came from an important spread. And apart from the Santa Rosa Compton knew of none to the east of him. Too, these men were obviously prepared for fighting. Compton did not want any trouble with another outfit, and this unforeseen development promised to upset all his plans. Even should they not be friends of Blake, but casual passers-by, they might well interfere. Yet like the bold leader John Compton was he had his own followers procure and mount their horses and look to their weapons. Then he impatiently waited for the next move.

Nearly an hour elapsed: Compton fretted. Then the leader of the mysterious party came out of the Casa Verde with Terry Blake. Both mounted, one of the men getting down to let the Texas cowboy have his horse. The two jogged lesiurely toward the Compton crew, and again the stranger fluttered a white handkerchief. Compton raised a hand in token of understanding, and turned to his men. Said he:

"I'll expect you men to respect that flag of truce and not do what that hound, Rollins, did this morning."

Blake and his companion halted but a few feet away, Compton facing them in stony silence. The stranger spoke first:

"John Compton, I am Angus McFarland, of the Triple X outfit in Texas; mayhaps you have heard of me. And I have heard of you, John Compton, as a square man and a brave one. Also I have heard of your senseless warring with the sheepmen hereabouts, and I have come to ask that you end it."

Compton purpled with anger; he asked with blunt directness that equalled McFarland's own.

"What call have you to butt into my affairs, McFarland?"

"Name it butting in if you will, Compton," the Scotchman replied quietly, "but that is not my intention. However, my son is lying badly wounded at this moment, shot by one of your men."

"Your son? Bruce? Why, I didn't know that he was mixed up in this. I am sorry about that. But if he was at the casa he knew what he was up against. You can go back, McFarland. This fight goes on until every hair of Pat O'Hearn's dead head is paid for twice over."

One of Angus McFarland's rare smiles illumined his austere countenance.

"Pat O'Hearn is even now eating the dinner of two full grown men in the casa, Compton. He bade me ask that you come to the house and confer with him. Pat is a wee bit incapacitated himself."

Relief highlighted John Compton's frowning face; a smile hovered about his lips and slipped away.

"I'll go see O'Hearn," he assented readily.

"Let the men come, too, Mr. Compton," Terry Blake spoke for the first time. "They look gaunted. We have plenty of hot coffee and maybe something else. It will be but a truce if you want it that way."

Compton's frown came back. He

glanced doubtfully around at his followers and he read in the faces of all a wistful expectancy. Compton remembered how staunchly they had rallied to him but an hour ago.

"All right," said he. "Shuck your guns, men."

"Oh, no," Terry Blake said quickly. "Wear your guns, boys. There's a lady in the casa and it wouldn't look right for you to go in half dressed."

Most of those present had heard that one before, yet it proved to be the right thing in the right place; they laughed boisterously and the tension was relieved. Still chuckling, more from relief than with mirth, they trooped after their leader to the Casa Verde.

THE CREW of the Triangle, Pat O'Hearn's men, the Tomlison riders and the garrison of the Casa Verde were squatted promiscuously about the patio of the casa. Rosalia had bestirred herself and each man had a cup of steaming coffee and at least a hunk of bread. They were chatting with one another as if they had never had a difference. The black bearded bandit from the Santa Rosa winked at Jake Hodges.

"Say, Jake, did you see Monte when he had his hurry call an' took to walkin' on our heads? Darn if I don't believe that gunie usta be a tight-wire puformer in a circus."

Monte laughed loudest of all.

In a room in the undamaged wing of the casa Angus McFarland, John Compton, Pat O'Hearn and Terry Blake were holding a session. O'Hearn was propped up in bed and he was doing most of the talking.

"'Tis thinkin' I am that we might have been just a little premature, John. Blake has been tellin' me—"

"Blake is a cold blooded killer," the Triangle owner interrupted doggedly. "You can't believe him."

Pat O'Hearn looked at Compton with the indulgence one would show to a pouting child.

"Wasn't it you who was tellin' me that Blake can snip the wing off of a flying grasshopper at twenty paces, John?" He lightly tapped Compton's bandaged shoulder. "I'll venture to say that hole in your shoulder is in the fleshy part, where 'twill do the least harm. Well, John, my boy, I have its twin. 'Tis a queer killer would do that, and us comin' at him with a drawn six-gun. As I was sayin', Blake told me that never in his life has he killed a man, or started a quarrel with one, except Dutch Keppinger. And I leave it to you, Compton, if Keppinger did not get what has been owin' to him these many years. And besides I have reason to believe that Keppinger was hired to kill Blake, **by whom I am not sure.** And I believe every word that Blake has told me."

John Compton knew that the shrewd Irishman was not easily imposed upon and that he was adamant when he thought that he was right. He could not afford to break with Pat O'Hearn. Too, the gambler, Hall, might well have lied to him about Blake; doubtless he had done so. He said grudgingly, looking at the Texas cowboy.

"Maybe I had you sized up wrong, Blake, although I am not sure of it yet. I hired Keppinger to beef you, yes. But I considered you to be as bad, or worse, than he was. I don't know yet whether you are or not. But I want to say one thing—I would give the Triangle; aye, and a right arm with it, if that innocent boy Keppinger killed was alive today."

There was sincerity in the cattleman's manner, pathos in his voice.

Terry Blake's bleak eyes warmed a trifle. Yet he said nothing.

"And now—" Pat O'Hearn resumed, as if there had been no interruption, "I am suggestin', John, that 'twould be wise to call this damned war off entirely. But before you commit yourself 'tis somethin' more I have to say." O'Hearn's kindly eyes grew stern. " 'Tis the many things I have heard since I was carried into this room; some of them which by rights I should have heard from you, John. And 'tis many thoughts I have had whilst lyin' here flat upon my back. And the things I have heard and the thoughts I have had do not make me proud of myself at all, at all.

"Whether you carry on this fight or not, John, I am takin' my boys back to the Scissors forninst. 'Twould do my heart good, old friend, if you would side me in this as you have sided me many times before. But if it is not to be, well and good."

John Compton was silent for a long time, then he said surlily.

"I am willing to call it off, O'Hearn."

"For how long?" Terry Blake put the question coldly.

Compton glared at Blake and made no reply. O'Hearn opened his mouth to speak, but Angus McFarland checked him with a glance.

"Gentlemen—" he began gravely. "I have had some experience with sheep, and I will admit that as a cattleman I, perhaps, like them as little as you. But one cannot battle against a natural law and a man made law when they are one. It is the law of nature that sheep must feed to live, and it is the law of man that they may feed upon the free range equally with the cattle. If you men will agree to allot a sufficient range from time to time to the sheep—it may be largely upon the uplands—and if you will respect that agreement scrupulously, I have no doubt that the sheep will be kept upon the lands you allot."

John Compton looked at Pat O'Hearn and O'Hearn looked at Compton; after all, they understood one another, these two. O'Hearn spoke for both.

" 'Tis a damned good thought, McFarland. Eh, John?"

John Compton nodded absently; he was thinking: 'I wonder how I can get Joe Rigsby back to the Triangle.'

Chapter XXV

DON GUADALUPE de Montoya was entertaining guests at dinner. He sat in state at the head of his great table in a high-backed chair much too large for his wasted frame. Angus McFarland comfortably filled a like one at the foot. Burce, bolstered with cushions, was at his father's right hand. Felipe, with one arm strapped to his side sat opposite Bruce. Terry Blake was there, and the two girls, Carmelita and Sally Spaulding. Before each was a measure of old Don Guadalupe's most cherished vintage, from a bottle to which the cobwebs still clung. Angus McFarland eyed appreciatively the golden bubbles within his glass as they raced gaily to the surface.

During an interlude he asked his son:

"And you will be coming back to the Triple X when you are in a condition to ride again, Bruce?"

A hush fell over the little group; Bruce glanced across the table at Carmelita. Said he:

"No-o, not for a while, father. Carmelita and I will soon be married; then we will come together."

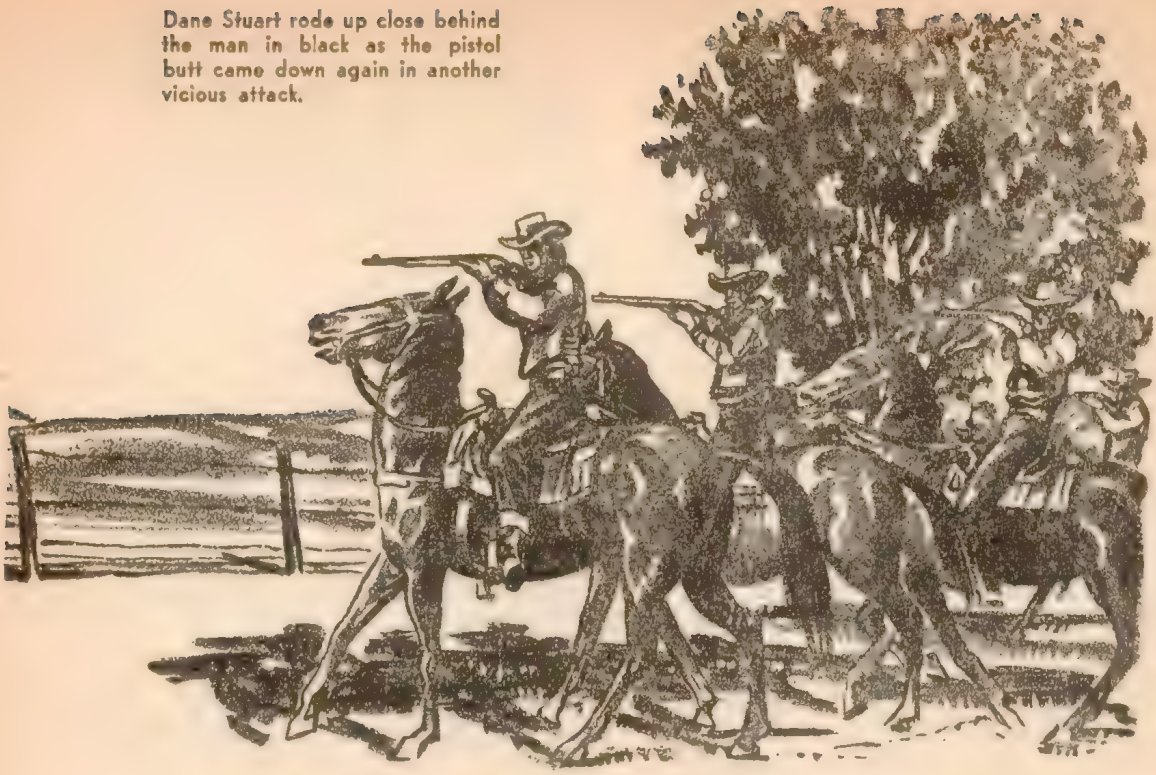
(Concluded on page 161)

RIDE WITH ME TO KANSAS

by Alexander Blade

The road to Kansas was closely guarded. Dane Stuart found this out when he rode into a pistol whipping

Dane Stuart rode up close behind the man in black as the pistol butt came down again in another vicious attack.



FROM THE top of the rise he saw the trail herd stretched along a mile of dusty road. He saw the barbed wire barricade that blocked the herd. He saw the men behind the wire, their rifles pointing like fingers of death.

All that Dane Stuart saw, and more. He saw the riders who had left the herd untended; five of them were around the girl. She might have been a pretty girl, but she wasn't pretty now. Her mouth was open in fear and horror and her face was pale. She was helplessly watching a sixth rider take a pistol whipping from a burly man who was dressed all in black.

Stuart took in the whole thing quickly, with the sweep of his eye. Instead of continuing down the drop, he cut back sharply over the brow and went around the side. Behind a thin screen of trees he rode back down.

Nobody heard him coming; the earth was soft. Nobody saw him; their own eyes were trained on the scene of violence. When Stuart cut back onto the road he was behind the man in black. Stuart's gun was in his hand.

"Hold it!" he said, his voice sharp and not too loud. "Hold it."

He saw the rifflemen come swinging around and he knew he had to move fast. With a rake of his spurs he had his big black leaping forward. The jump took him close behind the man in black.

The barrel of the gun dripped blood. It swung around and Stuart knocked it aside and jammed his own gun between black clad shoulders.

"I'd just as soon shoot you down," he said mildly. "You better drop

that."

The man in black had a full, hard face and a mouth grim enough for the task he'd been performing. He had a pair of deep set eyes that had looked on worse. Those eyes took in this lanky, wide shouldered man on the big black.

"Back off." His voice was low and hoarse. "Back off, you fool. My men have got you in their sights. You're a dead one if I give the word."

STUART had a lopsided smile that slid off the corner of his mouth and made him look like a crazy kid. But he wasn't crazy and he wasn't as young as he looked. And he'd seen a few things himself.

"You're forgetting just one thing, friend," he said mildly. "This gun in your back. Before your men could pull trigger I'd blow your spine out through your chest."

His own eyes were a smoky grey, and in those depths of smoke a fire burned. He meant what he said. The bloody gun dropped into the dust of the road; the rifles held their peace.

The beaten puncher was on his feet now, a stream of red coursing out of a gash on his cheek. He cursed wildly and made for the man in black.

"No," Stuart said. One word, but it stopped an anger-crazed man. "Somebody start talking. What's this all about?"

The punchers were looking at the girl. With the fright gone out of her and a minute to catch her breath, she was pretty. Her hair was raven black and her lips were full and red in an oval face. It looked like she was boss of this outfit.

"This is a holdup," she told Stuart bitterly. "Nothing but a holdup, Arkansas style. We're on our way to Kansas with the herd. But these men will not let us through."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Stranger, said the man in black, "you better get your nose out of this. That gun in my back will carry you only just so far."

"It'll get that barbed wire out of the road," Stuart grinned.

But he didn't push the point. He wasn't that nearsighted. Besides, he wanted to know more about this before he stuck his neck out further than it was.

"What's your side of it?"

The man in black was getting over his first shock at having a gun jammed into his back . . . He was relaxed now, sure of himself. He had Stuart sized up and he knew Stuart wouldn't do anything foolish.

"We want no Texas cattle carrying their fever to our own," he said. "There are other ways to Kansas. She can take her herd through the Nations."

"We'd be lucky to get through the Indian Nations alive, and you know it!" the girl snapped.

"That's your worry. I made you my offer; seventy-five cents a head and the cattle go through. Otherwise they can rot where they are."

He jerked his head down at the girl with an air of finality. Then he looked back over his shoulder at Stuart. His grin said he was very sure of himself.

"So the talk about the fever is just a fake," Stuart said.

"Call it what you want. Now back off. I don't like people who shove guns in my neck."

Stuart thought about it for a second. In the meantime his gun stayed where it was. Then, almost imperceptibly, his trigger finger loosened.

"No more gun whipping?"

"I don't think it will be necessary," the man in black said.

He was almost laughing as Stuart pulled back his gun and holstered it. It had been a very minor victory Stuart had won, after all. Things stood just about where they had stood. Except, Stuart thought, that a man was alive who might well have been dead by now.

THE GIRL was almost crying. Her fingers trembled as she tried to staunch the flow of blood down the cowboy's face. Stuart took a last look down from the rise. The man in black had ridden off toward town; but behind the wire barricade the riflemen still watched.

Then Stuart swung the black around and came down toward the girl. She had plenty of nerve, but her hands were slippery with blood and she wasn't doing much good. Her men had gone back to the herd.

"Here," Stuart said, "Let me help you."

His own fingers moved swiftly, expertly, pressing the edges of the wound together. She was fine as an assistant. When Stuart asked for cloth she didn't hesitate to pull out the tail of her shirt and rip off a strip.

"That'll do it," Stuart said as he finished. His tone was professional. "You can go back to work now."

The cowboy murmured his thanks and rode off, leaving Stuart and the girl alone. Her eyes looked moist but she was over the worst of it.

"A woman trail boss," Stuart wondered aloud. "I heard Texas women were something, but you don't look the type."

"Did you think we wore beards?" she said sharply. She thought he was laughing at her.

"Anything is possible," he grinned. "This fellow who told me said there wasn't anything prettier than a Texas gal when she had her dander up."

"Look here, Mr.—"

"Dane—" But she wasn't waiting.

"Mr. Dane, then. I have more important things to do than stand here and be laughed at."

He decided not to correct her mistake about his name. That wasn't important now, anyway. She was a long way from home, confused, and in a bad spot generally.

"Why not pay that fellow his seventy-five cents a head?" he suggested.

"Because I haven't got it. And if I did have it I still wouldn't pay!"

"Strong talk. If you were a man you might make it stick."

Her shoulders sagged dispiritedly.

"Strange that the fellow who told you so much about Texas forgot to mention that all the real Texas men went off to the war."

"Come to think of it, I believe he did mention it. That what happened to you? To your man, I mean?"

"To my brother, Bob. I did the best I could, but eventually I ran out of money, what with there being no market for cattle there. They say you can get a real price for beef in Kansas, if you can get the cattle through."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. The other trails are as bad as this one. Besides, it's getting too late in the season to waste time. I waited too long, after the war ended, figuring Bob would be right home and he could make the trip. When he didn't come I had to do it myself. It was either get some cash or lose our spread."

One of her men, an old grizzled fellow, had ridden up. He waited until

she finished speaking.

"We've got them well off the road now, Miss Carter," he said. "Should we turn them around the other way?"

"I—" She hesitated.

"Perhaps I could suggest something," Stuart said.

"You had a chance to do more than suggest," she said, suddenly angry again. "You had a gun in that fellow's back. If you'd had a little more nerve that wire would be down."

"Very unreasonable," Stuart grunted. "I never could get along with an unreasonable woman, Texas or otherwise."

But she had turned her back to him and was speaking to the old cowhand. As far as she was concerned it was plain that she was sorry she had wasted time talking to Stuart at all.

"Better wait a while, Larkin," she said. "I may ride into town after we get settled."

Stuart was turning his horse around. He paused for a look at the girl. The more he saw of her the prettier she seemed. He finished his turn and rode back over the rise and down toward the town. There was a tense moment when he went around the wire and the men behind it. But nothing happened.

PAINT WAS flaking off the false fronts on the few buildings along the street. Wooden sidewalks had been hastily hammered together and then allowed to fall into disrepair. The sign on the saloon hung on frayed rope, and when Stuart looked closely he saw that the front of the saloon was pitted and furrowed from gunfire. It was that kind of town.

He stood for a moment at the swinging doors, letting the men and the interior complete the picture his mind had formed when he saw the town itself. He was gazing on as bad a bunch as he'd ever seen.

There were three or four who looked like army deserters, from both North and South. Most of the others were regular frontier riffraff, rustlers, horse thieves. The cattle drives from Texas had drawn them all down here.

Stuart's eyes swept the room, looking for the man he knew would be there. He had seen the horse at the rail outside and recognized it. When he saw the burly figure in the black suit he made his way toward the man.

"Looks like a stranger to see you, Questin," somesone said. The man in black turned.

"You've got your gall," he growled as he recognized Stuart. His hand drifted downward toward his gunbelt.

"Forget it," Stuart said quickly. "I didn't know how things stood."

"Yeah, I guess you didn't. You've got plenty of nerve anyway, stranger."

"Dane is the name. A fellow was telling me that a little nerve would go a long way down here."

"Yeah? Maybe the fellow was right. Are you looking for a job?"

"I might be. Depends on how much money is in it."

"Plenty. You saw how we work things. And there's a herd along every week or so."

Stuart went through some rapid mental calculation in his mind. There were a thousand head and more in the girl's herd. Maybe even fifteen hundred. At seventy-five cents a head it came to a lot of money.

"What if they don't pay?" he asked. Questin laughed hoarsely.

"That's all right too. They don't

know much about Texas brands up in Kansas. Get the idea?"

Stuart got it. At seventy-five cents a head there was good money in tolls, and no work at all. But it would pay even better to steal the cattle and run them over the line into Kansas.

QUESTIN was playing it both ways, with the owner of the trail herd sure to be the loser in either case. And Stuart knew there were plenty of suckers to be taken.

With the war just over there was a great demand for beef. And through the years when the Texas men had been away the Texas cattle had multiplied. The North had the demand and Texas had the supply. Texans were driving their herds northward to cash in. But they were running head on into men like Questin.

"I don't know," Stuart said slowly. "My taste doesn't run to lying on my belly behind barbed wire."

"You join me and you won't have any belly flopping. That's for those who can't do better," Questin told him.

"I'll think it over."

Questin's mouth tightened to a thin line and behind his eyes there was a lurking suspicion. He had done a good deal of talking about the way he ran things. But that wouldn't worry him. There wouldn't be any law around to carry the story to. It was something else.

"Yeah," he said. "You think it over. But don't get any notions about setting up for yourself. Only one man runs this game around here, and that man is me."

Stuart nodded and let it go at that. There was a bottle on the bar and he reached over and got it and poured himself a drink. Questin scowled at him, then filled his own glass. They drank together and the whisky must have relaxed Questin because his scowl changed to a smile.

"What about the girl and her outfit?" Stuart ventured.

"She must still be where she was or one of my boys would have been in to let me know." Questin stared at him suspiciously. "You left after me. How did it look?"

"She'll stay over night, at least," Stuart told him.

"Good. I changed my mind. There's a place I know where I could get rid of about a thousand head at a good price. We can start moving the herd about dawn."

Questin was about to say more but he caught himself. "What makes you so sure she'll stay?" he demanded.

"I heard her say. Seeing how I helped her out she wasn't afraid to talk with me around."

That got a coarse laugh from Questin.

"Leave it to a woman to shoot off her mouth." He rubbed a big hand over his chin. "I got me an idea, Dane. With that crew of old fogies and kids she's got, we could take the herd any time. But like I said, just before sunup suits me best. So I wouldn't want her to change her mind about staying the night."

"Which gives me something to do," Stuart said. Questin was not hard to figure.

"Right. You'd be the only one around here she ain't afraid of. Make sure she stayed put and you got you a good split of the profits."

"Easy enough," Stuart said. "And fair enough. A deal." He reached for the bottle again and was surprised when Questin shoved him hard.

"Move down. Quick," Questin growled. "She's coming in now and I don't want her to see us together."

STUART WAS startled, but that didn't slow him up. By the time the doors flew open he was eight feet away and slouched at a table. Beyond the doors he could see the girl's horse tied at the rail. Questin had been facing the front and must have seen her as soon as she pulled up.

She came in fast but stopped abruptly just inside the doors. Stuart heard her suck in her breath. This was no place for a lady and she caught on to that fact quickly. But it was too late to back down.

Very slowly she came along toward the bar, her tight grip on her quirt making her knuckles white. When she caught sight of Questin her face blanched. It brightened again as her glance shifted to Stuart but he stayed where he was for the while and she turned again to seek out the bartender.

"I'm looking for the sheriff," she said distinctly.

The bartender grinned, shook his head.

"You mean he isn't here?"

"He means," Questin interjected, "that there ain't no sheriff."

Questin was laughing very quietly as he dipped down and drew his gun. Apparently he did little rough riding himself, as it was not tied down like many. Stuart started up, then stopped as he saw that Questin had laid the gun on top of the bar. It was a long barreled .44, single action, identical with the one Stuart and a good many others were toting.

"That's the only law there is around here," Questin laughed. "You can talk to it if you want."

His words brought a guffaw from the men and sent a hot flush into the girl's cheeks. Stuart got up then, his sharp turn like the cut of a sword, and the laughter died.

"All right," he said. He crossed to the girl and took a firm grip on her elbow. "I think you'd better be going."

Without protest she allowed him to walk her out, her face still flushed with embarrassment. Stuart waited until they were both mounted.

"That was a foolish thing to do," he said. "You should have known better."

"And you should have stopped me when I first came in!" she snapped. "I don't know just where you fit in around here, but I do know one thing. Your assistance is always too late and never enough to really help much. But you act like you expect something in return."

"Right now," Stuart told her, "all I expect is to ride along with you. You'll be safer if I do."

Her shrug said there was no way she could prevent him from riding with her. But she refused to talk to him. Stuart was content to maintain silence until they were within sight of the knoll from which he had first seen her.

"Still planning to stay through the night?" he asked then, as they swung wide to avoid Questin's barricade.

"Yes." She wasn't wasting words on him.

"I wouldn't. Take my advice and start moving as soon as it gets dark and move fast."

They were going up the rise now and she held her reply until they reached the top. Then she brought her horse up sharply.

"I may be a woman, Mr. Dane, but I'm no fool. I'm beginning to see your game. Once you get me out of the

reach of these cut throats here you'll have the field all to yourself!"

HER OUTBURST caught him unprepared and left him with his jaw hanging. His mind formed curses that never escaped his lips. If he'd left her to her own devices she might have decided to leave. Now she would stay over precisely because he'd advised her against it!

But her attitude was not totally foolish or contrary. There were no doubt plenty of lone wolves around who didn't have gangs like Questin's, but who weren't much better. Thinking she knew for certain what Questin had in mind, she would rather sit tight where she was than take a chance on running into worse.

Stuart had only a moment to change the direction of his own thoughts and plans. His sharp eyes swept the land below and around him. He was on the highest ground in the vicinity.

Had the rise spread further it might almost have been a ridge. Directly below was the barricade, on either side a cover of light timber that ran until it reached broken ground. Further back he could see the outlines of the town in the late afternoon sun.

Behind Stuart the Carter herd was stretched on both sides of the road, the men gathered now about a small chuck-wagon. And the Carter girl had swung about and was riding pell mell toward the wagon.

Stuart took a last look at the surrounding scene and then sent his own horse plunging down the angled road. He caught up with the girl and drew alongside as she slowed. They rode up to the men around the wagon together.

"I think I'll be safe enough now," she said contemptuously. She was close enough to smell his breath. "You can go back to your drinking."

His grin had a sudden lack of humor. Sweeping his hat from his head, Stuart made a bow and whirled his horse about. Every infernal thing was working out wrong, including especially the fact that she didn't trust him.

But blind temper was no failing of Stuart's, nor had it been the thing which had pulled him through tighter situations than this. He gulped down his anger, swallowed it whole, and kept his head.

An instant later he was glad he hadn't flared up. She was partly right without knowing it. But it wouldn't do any good explaining now. She'd never believe him.

His searching glance ran over the men around the wagon. A couple of them weren't out of their teens yet. The rest were older, too much older. One of the older ones was the grizzled man who had come up earlier to tell the Carter girl that the herd had been driven off the road, the one she'd called Larkin.

The old fellow was talking to her now. He was plainly her foreman. Stuart looked past the girl, caught Larkin's eye and held it. The foreman was surprised, but when Stuart gestured with his head, Larkin nodded.

NOT WAITING any longer, Stuart headed back up the road. He was almost at the top of the knoll when he turned off and cut around to one side. Pulling his horse up as soon as he was over the hump and out of sight of the wagon, Stuart waited.

He hoped it wouldn't take Larkin too long to get away. Time was like

money; when you had least of it to spare it went fastest. But old as he was, Larkin was no dawdler. Within a few minutes Stuart heard him coming up the slope.

"What's on your mind?" Larkin asked suspiciously as soon as he reined up next to Stuart.

"Plenty." Stuart came right to the point. "You're in a bad spot."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"Worse than you think. Worse than your boss thinks. If you want to save your hides you'd better do some fast listening."

"If you've got any ideas about us selling her out—" Larkin scowled.

"Save your threats," Stuart cut him short. "I'd have talked to her if I thought she'd listen."

He ran on quickly, giving Larkin as good a picture of the situation as he could. And as he talked the older man's suspicion vanished. He began to show real worry, and finally he nodded.

"We could make a run for it," he muttered.

"That's what I thought at first. But you wouldn't get ten miles pushing that herd ahead of you."

Stuart looked downhill to the road to make certain that none of the men behind the wire could see him and Larkin. Once more he saw how this rise dominated the immediate surroundings.

"How do you think this crew of yours would stand up under fire?" he asked Larkin. The old man looked surprised and then thought it over.

"All right, I guess. If they figured they had a chance. Depends on what you got in mind."

The telling of it took Stuart much too long for his own comfort. But he had to make certain that Larkin understood every detail. Even so, the odds were greatly against success.

"If one of those fellows down there just happens to sashay up for a looksee we're going to be cooked chickens," Larkin said grimly.

"We'll have to gamble that they don't. Apparently they let Questin do the thinking."

"What happens to you if we slip up?" Larkin said.

"That would be too bad," Stuart admitted. "But this fellow I knew said you could always depend on a Texan. Just don't forget the most important thing: see that you get Miss Carter out of the way."

"I'll try. But Ann Carter's got a mind of her own."

QUESTIN was waiting when Stuart got back to town. The burly man in the black suit was still standing near the end of the bar. At the swish of the swinging doors he looked up.

"Well?" he demanded.

"She'll stay," Stuart told him. Questin laughed.

"Looks like you made up your mind," he said.

"I never liked the short end of the odds," Stuart grinned.

Had Questin looked closely he might have seen the trace of worry behind the grin. It wouldn't take much to blow this whole thing up in his face. Stuart was thinking.

In fact, now that he came to think of it, Questin was taking this a little too easy. He was accepting everything at its face value. And yet a man would have to be more than just ruthless to make this hardened bunch accept him as their leader. He would have to be shrewd.

On the other hand, Questin had nothing to worry about. At least on the surface he didn't. When the right

time came he would make his move. Everything would work out as planned, as it probably had worked out many times in the past. Stuart wished he could get a line on Questin's intelligence.

"We've got some waiting ahead of us," Stuart said in an offhand way. "How about a game of poker to pass the time?"

Questin's hard features lit up. He liked the idea. Within a few minutes they had a six hand game going around a table. Unobtrusively, Stuart managed to get the seat on Questin's right.

It turned out to be strictly an honest game, but Stuart realized that it could not be otherwise. If there was honor between thieves that was only because they wouldn't give each other a chance to cheat.

Stuart had hoped to learn something about Questin by the way the burly man played. He was not disappointed. But the things he learned gave him no pleasure.

Questin was a clever gambler. He knew when to stay and when to go out. Stuart tried a couple of very strong bluffs and Questin called him both times.

That was a bad sign. Stuart saw he had guessed right. Questin's easy, almost indolent, manner was just a front. He wasn't the kind to let anything get past him.

Stuart felt a trickle of sweat run down his back when he saw the bartender light up the lamps. Darkness had crept up swiftly. Over the tops of the swinging doors Stuart got a glimpse of a sky which had turned deep blue.

"You're acting kind of nervous," Questin observed.

The big man turned in his seat and the butt of his gun brushed Stuart's thigh. Stuart looked down, looked up again quickly. He had to think fast. There wasn't much time left.

"I'm all right," he said. He got up smiling. "Play a few hands without me. I'm going out for a couple of minutes."

He heaved a silent sigh when nobody offered to join him. Outside the door he paused, rose on the tips of his toes for a quick look backward. They were all at the table.

When he came back they were still there, in the middle of a hand. Stuart dropped into the chair he had vacated and was dealt in on the next pot. The game rolled along.

It was still going an hour later when the sound of a fast moving horse in the street outside made them pause. A moment later the doors were flying open as one of Questin's riflemen rushed into the saloon.

"Questin!" he shouted. "They're moving that herd back down the trail!"

The suddenness of it brought Questin out of his chair with a curse. At the same time Stuart rose. His body hit Questin with a jarring force that threw the big man off balance and knocked his gun out of his holster and onto the floor.

Stuart was twisted half around. He tripped over his own feet and came down on all fours. Above him, Questin said, "You clumsy fool!" Stuart saw a big boot drawn back.

HE SUCKED in a breath and waited for the kick to come. But Questin had only been shifting position. He was looking floorward. Now, as Stuart scrambled up, Questin saw the gun lying directly under him.

"Give me that," Questin snapped. Stuart shoved the gun at him and grinned foolishly.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I got excited. Looks like that girl crossed me up."

"Or like you crossed me up," Questin snarled.

"What would that get me?"

"Yeah," Questin grunted. He turned to the man who had brought the news. "You come in alone?"

"Sure. The rest stayed there like you told us."

"Good. We don't want to tip our hand."

Questin spun on his heel, his finger ticking off four men besides Stuart.

"All right. Let's get going. No use riding more than we have to."

Stuart stuck close to him as they ran for the door. Within seconds they had all swung onto their horses, Questin waiting until the last was mounted before he led the way out of town.

The night was clear but not too bright, with only a sliver of moon showing. Conditions were perfect for Questin's purpose. From a short distance they could see the men at the wire barricade, mounted and waiting, at least eight of them.

They waved when they saw Questin and got ready to swing around the wire onto the road. But as the big man drew up he motioned them to stay where they were.

"Give our horses a chance to get their wind," he said.

Over his voice now there was the lowing of cattle, not yet very far off on the other side of the rise. The air had a slightly dusty feel.

"They're moving, all right," Questin said. "Well, they won't get far. You know what to do now. The men will be behind the herd, pushing it along. They won't see you before it's too late."

They were all swinging around the wire, Stuart sticking close to Questin in the rear. At the last moment Questin pulled away, calling to Stuart to do the same.

"Let them take the chances," the big man said cynically. "You and I will go around the side."

His laugh had hidden meanings in it but Stuart had no time to think of that. He had swivelled about in the saddle. Questin's men were all back on the road, their horses gathering speed as they surged up the rise in a body.

Now, Stuart thought. Now.

A BLAST of gunfire split the night. Then another. Questin was shouting curses and half his men were down in the dust of the road. The rest broke and ran as another volley roared down from the top of the knoll.

Not many left, Stuart saw. The surprise had been perfect; it was as neat an ambush as any he'd ever seen.

And then his throat was suddenly dry and his heart pounding. For out of the trees on the opposite side of the road Ann Carter came racing, fighting a horse that the gunfire had sent out of control! She was going to run head on into the remnants to Questin's gang as they ran for cover.

"Grab her!" Questin yelled.

It was doubtful whether his men could hear him. But Stuart was taking no chances. He lifted his own horse forward in a leap that brought him onto the road and his hand dropped to his gun.

Twice the gun barked, and at each crack a man went down. The rest veered off as the Carter crew came down after them. Stuart swung over to go after the girl on the plunging

horse. But Questin was not finished yet.

The big man cut around Stuart and was alongside the girl before him. A huge hand caught loose reins and jerked the horse's head up and brought him to a halt. The girl was between the two men.

"Not yet!" Questin snarled. The gun in his free hand was jammed into Ann Carter's back.

"I had a hunch you were up to something," he called to Stuart. "That's why I wanted you near me. Tell her men to drop their guns or I'll shoot."

Stuart kept coming. He had slowed his horse to a walk but his forward motion did not stop. His face was twisted in a grin.

"No," he said. "I guess not. I had a hunch too. That wasn't your gun I gave back to you after I'd knocked it to the floor. It was mine. And I'd taken the bullets out of it while I was outside the saloon."

He was circling even as he spoke and he was close enough to see Questin's face go white. Questin's arm jerked as he pulled the trigger. There was the click of the hammer as it hit an empty chamber.

QUESTIN wasn't the man to go through the same wasted motion twice. His gun hand came whipping up and there was the glint of steel as the .44 sailed toward Stuart's head.

Stuart ducked smoothly and the gun went on past him. But in the meantime Questin had flung himself sideward to clear the girl and her horse. His hand darted beneath the edge of his black coat.

Stuart's shot made a neat hole in the dark cloth below Questin's moving hand. The hand stopped moving and Questin's eyes were wide and suddenly without hardness. He half twisted, then fell out of his saddle.

The girl's horse was trying to bolt again and Stuart grabbed at the reins. Larkin had come up on the other side and between them they steadied her.

"You all right?" Stuart asked. She nodded and he grinned at her.

"I tried to get her out of the way like you said," Larkin told him. "But it wasn't no use. We started the herd going and then came back and she must have been right behind us."

Larkin let out a chuckle. "Anyway, it sure worked out fine. Just like you said it would."

It wasn't taking Ann Carter long to catch on. Her eyes swept up and back between the two men.

"I guess," she said slowly, "I owe you an apology, Mr. Dane."

"This fellow said there isn't anything prettier than a Texas gal when she apologizes," Stuart grinned. "And just to get things straight, my name is Dane Stuart. You may have run across it in a letter."

"Stuart?" she gasped. "Dane Stuart. Then this fellow you've been quoting—"

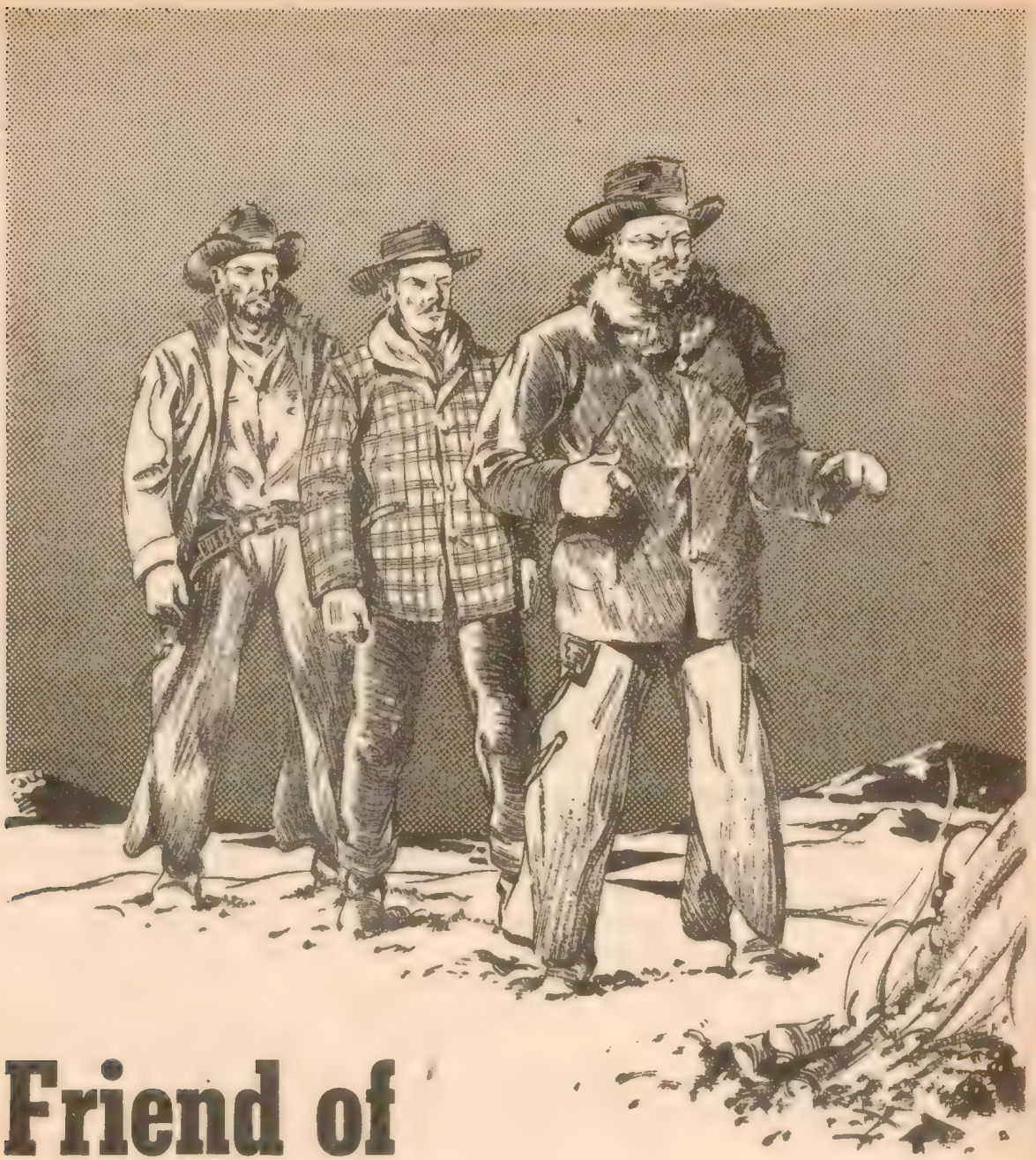
"None other than your brother, Bob. He's in a hospital in Vicksburg, waiting for a broken leg to mend. He asked me to ride down and see how you were."

He got a quiet pleasure watching the emotions flit across her face. "You're sure Bob is all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Sure. He said to give you a kiss for him. Just for him, of course."

"Of course."

She was smiling as her lips lifted to meet Stuart's. Her lips were cool and soft. It was just like Bob had said it would be.



Friend of the Breed

by H. B. HICKEY

A man can feel pretty lonely out in the snow with his hands tied behind him. Then a real friend comes in handy

May Benton moved forward and suddenly raised the rifle in her arms . . .

AFTER THE bite of that raw wind the heat of Weiler's pot-bellied stove was like a double shot of whiskey to Dave Endless. He threw open his sheepskin, shivered with pleasure as warmth enveloped him. Heat brought the blood back to his dark face and set it glowing.

Still disregarding the other men in the store, Endless tamped circulation back to his feet. He was aware of their hard scrutiny without showing the fact, sharply aware too of the sheet of white paper that Weiler still held. The storekeeper had been reading aloud but had stopped when Endless pushed through the door.

"Cold, men," Dave said, knowing it was up to him to break the awkward silence. "When the snow hits it should warm up. But right now it's cold enough to freeze spit before it lands."

His smile touched a circle of grim faces and then died. He knew he should not have tried humor against that stone wall of dislike, and the knowledge made his chunky body tense. Weiler shifted ponderously and loosed a stream of tobacco juice that sizzled on the cherry-red stove.

"Not too cold for your friends, though, Endless," he gritted. "It never is, is it? They raided Blaine last night and got away with six head."

"I heard. Fenshaw came by this morning and told me. It's Blaine's own fault. He's got all the land any man needs, but he insists on running his stock onto Indian ground. In their place you'd do the same as they."

"Always got a good word for them, haven't you?" Calson grunted. He was a lean and hardbitten man and he didn't bother to hide his dislike.

"It's my job to protect them as much as to protect white men. That's what the government is paying me for."

"Other commissioners don't see it that way," Weiler said, waving Calson back. "They stick with their own people. And they don't bite the hand that feeds them."

Some of the color in Dave's cheeks was from anger now. He hadn't wanted the job when it was offered, but he had taken it anyway. It had brought him trouble and the enmity of his neighbors. But it had also brought him close to the tragedy of a dispossessed people, and it had given him an insight into their actions and motives.

"Indians are as human as we," he retorted. "If we had to take the pushing around we've given them I guess we'd break out once in a while too."

He cut off Weiler's reply with an angry gesture.

"Furthermore, Weiler, someone has been selling whiskey to the Indians. I don't know yet who it is, but when I find out I'm going to make it hot for him."

"Are you accusing me—?"

Weiler moved his big body belligerently around the counter but stopped when Dave swung to meet the challenge. Dave stared him down and saw some of the purple go out of Weiler's face. The storekeeper was no coward, but he had seen Dave Endless in more than one fight.

"When I make my accusation it'll be plain enough," Dave said. "You won't have to ask me who I mean."

His eyes flickered over the men, over Calson, Maney, Heller, Daves, McHugh, Al Benton. Dave cursed inwardly. Why couldn't Al stay out of it? Bad enough to have everyone else hate him. Knowing that he might have to fight May Benton's brother didn't make it any easier.

IT WAS hard to say just where Al stood. Young, surly, a drinker and a gambler, he was out of place among these ordinary ranchers and townsmen. They hated Indians partly for profit and partly because old customs said that white men should. He might be adding his voice just for the fun of stirring up a fight.

"How come you haven't taken up with squaws, Endless?" he said now. A sly grin twisted his lips. "That little Summer Cloud is a nice bit."

It was a joke that was bound to please and the rest guffawed. Dave let it drop. So did Al. He knew exactly how far he could go.

Red with laughing, the others settled down. They looked at Weiler and he nodded. Something about the whole setup caught at Dave's consciousness. He had expected them to be hostile, but now there was a sly sureness in their attitudes that made him watchful. He pulled the sheepskin tight around him, got his gloves back on.

"What I really came for," he said slowly, "was to tell you that I've ordered the Indians to stay out of town until I've settled this Blaine affair."

"By god!" Weiler's big fist thundered onto the counter. This was money out of his pocket. "You've got the gall of a half-breed!"

"You'll get their furs later," Dave said contemptuously. "Meanwhile, the order stands. And it works both ways. Keep away from the reservation."

Maney was a shrewd Irishman. He saw how things were going and he tried to shut Weiler up. But the big storekeeper was too angry to pay any heed. His voice was a bellow.

"Let him know! He'd find out soon enough anyway."

He waved the letter in his hand at Dave.

"You're just about through here, Endless! We've taken all the guff we're going to. We ask for troops and you go over our heads and tell Washington troops aren't needed. Well, we've demanded a new commissioner. And this little paper says our demands are being considered."

"They'd better be," someone said.

Dave had known it was coming. Sooner or later it had to. They had figured to keep it from him, though, so they could enjoy their victory the more. But now that it was out in the open they were not afraid of the consequences. They were watching Dave expectantly, eager to see how he would take the blow.

He disappointed them. His face was locked against them. Whatever pain he felt was not for himself, but for those he tried to protect.

He knew how things would work out. The new commissioner would be a man who would look the other way. There would be one provocation after another, until the Indians had their bellies full and hit back. Then the commissioner would call for troops.

Dawes heaved his heavy body out of his chair, went around behind it, leaned thick hands on its back. His glare came up at Dave from beneath dark shaggy brows.

"When that new man comes, Endless, you'd better get up on that high horse of yours and ride fast. You're protected now. You won't be then. Indian-lovers won't be safe around here."

"Thanks for the warning. You can be up front in the bunch that comes to get me."

"Don't worry. I will be. I don't scare easy. And I don't fool easy, either. That talk about someone selling booze to the Indians don't take me in at all. It's just something you dreamed up. They don't need booze to make them bad; they always were and always will be."

"What's the use talking?" Maney said. "A man who'll pal with a breed is no better than one himself. Take Gingy Ben with you when you go, Endless."

THEIR rough laughter followed Dave through the door. That was the worst of it, he thought. You couldn't fight a thing as deep rooted as hatred of the Indian without bringing down some of that hatred

on your own head.

The last thing people wanted to do was think. Easier to stick to the old ideas. Men like Maney and Dawes and Calson were not bad; they just didn't like to have their minds changed. Indians were bad; white men were good. Let it stay that way. And if trouble comes, stick to your own.

Pushing into the teeth of the numbing wind, Dave felt its bite in his lungs. He got his head down, took a fresh breath, and cursed the men he'd left behind in the store.

They'd stick with their own, all right. Until one of their own used them as tools for his personal gain. Play on their prejudices and you could get ordinarily decent men to do anything, even commit murder.

A fast moving figure came around the corner of the store and flagged Endless down. It was Gingy Ben, so called because his skin was the color of ginger. Even in this bitter weather the quarter-breed wore only a fringed jacket, thin trousers and moccasins. Yet his knife-scarred face and bare hands showed no effects of cold.

"Find out anything?" Dave asked.

"No. No luck. Much talk by the young bucks, but no information. Silence when I speak of Blaine's cattle."

"What about the whiskey?"

"Nothing about the whiskey. I am not trusted by my own people either. They say let Endless get the seller, then the buyers will have nothing."

"Just what I figured," Dave muttered. "The ones who are getting the stuff WON'T TALK. The others don't know."

"Bad ones in every crowd."

"Yeah. That may be true, but it doesn't help me right now."

He reached out and swung Ben around and pulled him into the shelter of a building. Here the wind could not get at them, and Dave could keep his voice low.

"I'm being pushed out, Ben. Soon. You know what that means."

"Yeah. Troops. Then war."

"I've got only one hope; to get the man who's stirring up the trouble. He'll be the one behind this whiskey trading too. Weiler figures to be my man. He's the kind and he stands to make most."

"Maybe so. Maybe not. Two weeks now I watch Weiler every night. He stays home. But the whiskey moves."

Dave shook his head despondently. Ben would not be wrong. If he said Weiler hadn't left the house, he hadn't. Whoever was drumming up this war was pretty slick. Too slick for Dave Endless, it looked like.

"You'd better be ready to move too, Ben," he warned.

Gingy Ben laughed soundlessly, his teeth showing crooked and yellow but very strong and all there. It was impossible to guess his age but he was certainly not over forty.

"I mean it," Dave said quickly. "I played the wrong side and my life ain't worth a plugged nickel. Yours is worth less."

"My father came to live here in the shade of the mountains," Ben said. "But my grandfather was of the Plains."

Knowing what Ben meant, Dave knew also that argument was futile. To prove his valor a Plains Indian with a war party had himself staked down at the end of a long rope when the enemy hove into sight. There was no running away.

"See you tonight?" Ben asked.

"No. I won't be coming in."

Dave looked up at the sky and saw that the snow clouds were driving close. Already the temperature was

dropping and by evening there would be a thick white layer on the earth. The mountains loomed very close, partially obscured by a gray haze. Dave's place was too far out for him to ride into town in bad weather.

He shrugged, started to say something, and then noticed that Gingy Ben was already ten feet away, moving soundlessly on moccasined feet. Dave lifted one shoulder again and went on down the street, his own heels striking hard.

SHE WAS standing at the window, watching him come toward the house. Dave looked up and saw her and waved. He took the few steps at a leap, slid through the door quickly when May Benton opened it. The house was not overly warm.

"I saw you when you rode in," she said. "You were a long time at Weiler's.

"I had some news for them. They didn't like it."

He stared out of the window down the gray street and saw Weiler's door open. Al Benton came out, shouldering something heavy, and crossed over toward the saloon. Irritation tightened Dave's lips and he said:

"Why doesn't your brother keep out of it? He doesn't stand to gain a thing, and one of these days he'll get me sore enough so I'll forget who he is."

She wheeled sharply and Dave saw the flush come up on her neck. She was tall and straight and not pretty, but very strong looking, and with clear eyes that grew protective whenever Al was mentioned.

"Let him alone, Dave. He's a good boy who was unlucky enough to get a bad reputation. He wouldn't hurt anyone."

"All right. It doesn't matter anyway. I'm losing my appointment."

"I'm glad. You'll be able to settle down to running your own place now. And maybe we can—"

"No." His tone was sharper than he had intended and he lowered his voice. "They're after my scalp, May. Literally."

He watched the fright climb into her eyes. She had to steady herself a moment before she spoke again.

"You won't stay, Dave? You don't have to. I'll go with you anywhere you want. We can be married somewhere else. It doesn't have to be here."

He looked at her long and gravely and said, "We'll see. There's a little time yet."

But it was no use. She could see in his face that his mind was already made up. He was going to stay. The knowledge grayed her lips and made her eyes remote from him.

"You're looking for trouble, Dave. Right from the start you've been looking for it. You'd back any thieving Indian against one of your own. I just saw you talking to Gingy Ben as though he was one of your best friends."

"A thief is a thief," Dave said. "But I have to do what I think is right. Blaine lost some cattle last night. I'll get him a fair settlement if he just sits tight and makes no trouble. But it goes deeper than that. As for Gingy Ben, you know he pulled me out of a fifteen foot drift last winter at the risk of his own life."

"That's an old story. Everyone knows it. How long are you going to keep paying off that debt?"

"I'm sorry you feel that way, May."

He picked up his hat and turned to go. She spoke quickly, before Dave could take the first step.

"I don't. I wish I could, but I don't. It's hard for a woman, Dave."

He thought of that on his ride home. And he almost wished he were more like the others, willing to go along with the crowd. Now he'd likely be dead before he got much older, and May would be a widow before she was a wife. Hard lines for a woman.

Dave forced himself to think of other things. Maybe there was still a chance. He'd thought he could follow the familiar pattern of Indian troubles, of the white man's attempt to rob them by whiskey, trickery, and finally by force.

Weiler had figured to be his man. Weiler grew rich on his fur trade and his other businesses. Weiler was greedy enough to want more and not care how he got it. The Indians held rich lands. Weiler would be first in line if they were pushed out.

But it wasn't Weiler. Gingy Ben wouldn't be wrong. Weiler was sticking close to home.

Dave cursed h o p e l e s s l y and spurred his horse off the road and across the upward rolling range. He had figured to stop at Blaine's on his way and talk over the settlement. That could wait until tomorrow. He was in no mood for more arguments today.

He let his horse pick its own way over the ridge and down into the valley. The trail was clear cut, leading straight into Dave's yard. He stabled the animal, let the gear lay, and crossed to the house.

He ate quickly, without tasting the food, started to go out again and then changed his mind. It was a good day for staying in. By nightfall there would be snow on the ground. He could spend the day preparing for it.

TROUBLE always rode with a crowd, Dave Endless reflected His keen eyes picked out moving black dots against the whiteness of the valley rim, watched the dots grow larger as they took the downtrail toward the house.

He got the Winchester down from the wall, made sure it was loaded, then dropped it near the door. If they were after him they wouldn't be coming so openly. By now the dots had become a tight knot of horsemen.

He threw on his sheepskin and stepped out to meet them and astonishment widened his eyes when he saw May Benton up in the lead with the thick-chested Dawes. Dawes had his rifle in his saddle holster; so did May and the others. And each had snowshoes slung across his back, even Weiler.

Heller and Maney fanned out to one side as though to cover Dave and he cursed the impulse which had made him drop the rifle. He dug a fist into a pocket, as though the pocket might hold a gun. This bunch really looked like trouble.

"All right," he said at last, breaking the silence. "What is it? You didn't come to pay a social call."

"No." Dawes' voice was heavy. "We didn't. We come to ask your help."

He looked at May and she bit her lips. Dave noticed a pallor about her. Her eyes were sunk in shadows; she hadn't slept much. Dawes waited it out, still watching her, and at last she nodded.

"Dave, you've got to come with us. We're after Gingy Ben. He killed my brother Al last night."

Words sprang to Dave's lips but he held them back, trying to measure the situation. She had made a bare statement. There were questions he

might ask, after he had thought it over a minute. The men misinterpreted his hesitation.

"You're one of the best trackers around here, Endless," Maney said, hunching his small body forward on his saddle. "And every man counts. Gingy Ben won't be easy to take if we find him. You hold back now and you'll be endangering all our lives."

There was a hidden warning in his words. Hidden, but still there. They would not take a refusal without violence. But Dave kept his gaze fixed on the girl until she spoke again.

"Don't make me talk about it, Dave. I saw Al afterward." Then the pleading note was gone and her voice was high and harsh, and her eyes were as hard as those of the men around her.

"Well? Yes or no, Dave?"

"All right. I'll go along."

CALSON and Maney followed him into the house when he went in to change his clothes. The sheepskin came off; it was too heavy for travel afoot. Dave got out his snowshoes, slung them across his back along with the Winchester.

"You'd better play this straight," Calson said, his thin face watchful. "We know Ben is a friend of yours."

Dave fought down an impulse to hit the man. It was because of May that he was going along, he thought, not because he was afraid. Besides, he wanted information.

"What started the fight between Ben and Al?" he asked.

"Who said there was a fight?" Calson blurted. He refused to let Dave get a word in.

"This was a slaughter, Endless! I know you're looking for an out. There isn't any. He cut Al Benton to ribbons, the way only an Indian would. And he didn't bother to cover his tracks."

"We're not guessing," Maney added. "This is for sure."

They both sounded very certain, Dave thought. It was a sure bet, then, that Ben had killed Al. And in that case it didn't matter that Ben had once saved his life. He had to help track down the breed.

"You said he didn't cover up. Which way did he go?"

"Half way here, along the road. Then he cut off and we lost his trail. Our figure is that he headed for the reservation."

This time Dave's impulse was almost irresistible. He had to fight his temper down, but it came out in words.

"The reservation! So that's why you came here instead of keeping hot on the search. You damn fools! That's the last place in the world he'd go. He wouldn't put the whole reservation in jeopardy."

Still boiling mad, he flung himself out of the door. Weiler got a look at Dave's face and reached for his gun. When Calson and Maney came out behind Dave, Weiler let his hand drop.

"How much of a lead has Ben got?" Dave asked, disregarding Weiler.

"About four hours," Maney told him.

"He really outfoxed you. Now you've given him another hour by coming here. You're so full of notions about the way Indians ought to act that you can't see the way they do act."

He ran for the stable and saddled up hurriedly. They'd be able to ride only to the point where Ben had left the road. Ben was too smart to stick to terrain where he could be followed on horseback.

Chances were they'd never see Ben again. In a straight race on foot across bad country he could outlast and outrun almost any white man. Nevertheless it had to be tried.

They rode out of the valley at a canter, held back by the thin film of snow the wind had blown across the trail. Drifts had piled high in some places, in others the hard earth was bare. Once over the rim the going got better, but even at that the horses were tired by the time they reached Ben's trail.

GINGY BEN had come up from town along the road, using a long the backtrail far enough to see that Ben had not tried to cross them up by backtracking.

Ben's point of departure from the road had been cleverly chosen. On both sides the ground was rocky and barren, clear of snow for a long stretch. To the east was the reservation, to the west the mountains rose abruptly. And as the ground to the west lifted upward in sharp swells it was covered with a thick white blanket of snow.

Drifts had piled up, deep and treacherous. Horses were useless, sure to be mired. In many of the hollows there was enough snow to cover both horse and rider, Dave knew.

"We'll have to get off here," he said. "Be sure to take enough rope so that if someone breaks through the crust we'll be able to fish him out."

There was a momentary hesitation. Dave had taken the lead, but they did not trust him fully. Weiler shot a questioning glance at Calson, who was next to him.

"I still think he headed for the reservation," Calson said.

"All right. We'll try both sides. A couple of you go over the ground to the east. The rest of us will head west. Stick to places where the snow is thin and might have drifted over Ben's tracks."

Dave was first to dismount. He waited impatiently while the others climbed down from their saddles. May ranged herself alongside him; Maney and Heller followed her. When they were ready, Dave started off at a brisk pace.

Barren earth offered no clues. If Ben had travelled this ground he had done so on ghostly feet. For more than half a mile the rest watched Dave scan the ground with no results.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Dave," May said at last.

He scowled in irritation. Still, she was only voicing what was the general opinion.

"You didn't think Ben would make it easy for us, did you?" Dave grunted.

HE KEPT his eyes glued to the ground and moved forward. Drifts were to be avoided, as were any place where the snow might be thick. Where the white film was powdery was the best bet, Dave knew.

Ben would have seen to it that he left the shallowest possible prints. And he would have taken all factors into account. He would certainly have chosen a route open to the wind, so that his tracks would be filled in by snow.

Behind him, Dave felt the tension mounting. He forced himself to forget that. Up ahead the powdery surface was wide and unbroken, flanked by rocky walls. Granted that Gingy Ben was headed for the mountains, he would certainly have avoided a long detour. If there were tracks they'd be on this stretch.

At the edge of the white fringe Dave dropped to one knee and removed his hat. Disregarding Maney's abrupt question, he swung the hat in a wide arc, so that its brim swept the snow lightly.

Fitful gusts puffed the snow back into Dave's face and turned his eyelashes white. He paused to wipe them and moved over to start on a fresh section. Again there was no result; he shifted his labors to a new quarter.

"You're stalling, Endless," Maney said.

Dave caught the undertone and turned. Maney's holster was empty his gun hand out of sight behind his saddle. Maney could empty his gun before Dave got his rifle off his back.

"I don't think you understand me," Dave told him. "Gingy Ben killed a man. That man was May's brother. What I owe Ben is forgotten. I'm out to get him."

HE WAITED, watching Maney's face. Either the Irishman believed him, or he didn't. Dave had made his position as plain as he could. Maney believed him, not wholeheartedly but enough to put up his gun for the moment.

Somewhere along this stretch there had to be a footprint. Gingy Ben didn't have wings. Dave swept his hat across the snow, moved on, swung the hat again.

Powdery crystals lifted, hovered, and settled back again. But not fast enough. Dave had caught a glimpse of webwork imprinted on the underlying layer.

"Got it!"

They moved up behind him, bending low to see when Dave carefully cleaned away the top snow. It was Ben's track, all right. No one else could have been along this way.

Heller's voice lifted in an urgent shout, hoarse but far carrying. Weiler's answering yell came back like an echo. Within minutes he and the burly Dawes hove into sight, moving fast despite their size. Beside them Calson's long legs ate up ground. In the meantime Dave uncovered more tracks.

"Get your snowshoes on," he said. "Ben was heading for that strip along the shelf there. It'll be deep."

And it was deep. Against the rising rocky wall the snow had piled up, covering Ben's tracks. But beyond that immediate stretch of ground Ben had given up all attempts at concealment. Dave straightened, grateful for the relief it gave his back.

"He headed for the mountains, all right," he grunted. "From here on his trail will be plain enough."

Dave's eyes lifted upward, gauging the trail Gingy Ben had taken. It was a trail to discourage pursuit, up through a thin screen of evergreens and beyond that into ground that was rocky and bare and narrow against the face of rising cliffs. If a man slipped there he'd wind up at the bottom of a gorge.

"What're you waiting for?" Dawes demanded.

Dave grinned wolfishly. Before this was over Dawes would be panting and wiping sweat from his face. So would the rest of them. And although he could not say so, their chances of catching Gingy Ben were almost nil.

"Nothing Maybe you'd better go back, May."

"I'll string along. If I fall behind you can leave me."

Dave could not help but admire her. She knew what she was getting into. Or she thought she did.

"It's not that," Dave told her. "I'm thinking partly about what might happen if by some stroke of luck we catch up to Ben. There will be shooting."

"I've got a gun."

Dave shrugged and gave it up. Why waste valuable breath? If anything developed he would give her all the protection he could. The rest would take care of their own skins.

THE PACE Dave set was grueling, but it was a pace that moved them along. Ben's tracks showed that he was using a long stride, slower than theirs, and not as tiring. But if they couldn't catch Ben soon they'd never catch him.

They rested once among the evergreens, again at the start of a narrow ledge along a precipitous wall. Ben, too, had paused here. A furrow in the snow showed that he had scooped up a handful for drinking purposes. Dave bent and ran a bare finger along the inside of the furrow.

"What's that for?" Calson asked, still suspicious.

"I think we've picked up an hour or so," Dave told him. "The sun was up when Ben stopped here. This groove is slick and icy; the snow was moist when Ben was here."

Weiler mopped his brow and looked worried. An hour was not enough, he would be thinking. At any rate it would take days to catch Gingy Ben.

Dave took a moment to scan the sky. At least there was no sign of further snowfall. But the morning was already gone. If they stuck this out much longer they'd be caught in the mountains for the night. No a pleasant prospect.

"It's up to you," Dave told them. "We may find some sort of shelter or we may not. Frankly, I don't think we will. My advice is to go back."

No sooner had he said the words than he wished he had kept his mouth shut. He was bound to rub them the wrong way. Calson had started to unbend; now his brows made a straight black line of suspicion.

"We should have known you'd figure it that way," he scowled. "The only reason you've strung along this far is that you thought we hadn't a chance of getting Gingy Ben. Now, when we're catching up, you want to turn back."

Dave had no answer for that. Anything he said was sure to be wrong. He kicked his feet out of his snowshoes and waited for the rest to do the same. Flattening himself against the cliff wall, he inched across it, followed by the others.

Weiler had a paunch. It kept his body out where the wind could pluck at it. Dave grinned at the frightened sound of Weiler's breathing. He wondered how Calson felt about things now.

Then the cliff was behind them and their way was along the slope of a shallow valley. Ahead of them Ben's tracks were clear in the slanting rays of the cheerless afternoon sun. The tracks led over the lip of the valley in a straight line that showed Ben had not begun to tire.

"I can't tell a thing," Dave said in response to a question by one of the men. "All we can do is keep going and hope."

But even his own flesh shrank when he saw the trail Gingy Ben had taken on the other side of the valley. Still unwavering, Ben's tracks marched across a broken and jumbled plateau, windswept and forbidding.

Dave moved doggedly now, wasting

no breath in talk. At the edge of the plateau there were sharp rises, fringed by gnarled and stumpy trees. And on the other side of those trees nothing but empty air.

Weiler's breathing had a rasping quality and Dawes was no better off. Dave tried to estimate their staying power. But even that didn't matter now. They couldn't possibly get back by nightfall. He cursed them under his breath as he gave May a hand around a huge boulder.

AND THEN, suddenly, crazily, the picture changed. Gingy Ben had become overconfident. He had forgotten for a moment the tricks that wind and snow can play on a man.

For Dave the story of Ben's mistake was clearly written on the white surface. The breed had come around this same rock and had found a seemingly crusty slope. But the crust had given out, and Gingy Ben had taken a rolling fall of twenty feet and more.

He had landed hard in a drift that was not deep enough to break the complete force of the roll. The imprint of his body was still there, clear on one side and blurred on the other. He had twisted about in that direction.

"Looks like we get a break," Dawes said, jubilance making his voice ride high.

"Ben took a bad spill all right," Dave agreed.

He skirted the slope and edged his way around the drift. Signs of Gingy Ben's floundering tapered off to a deep hollow. Dave removed a mitten, ran his hand inside the hollow, straightened abruptly and followed the tracks that led away from the hollow. He threw words back over his shoulder.

"Worse spill than I thought. He broke a shoe; sat here for a long while fixing it. And when he left he was dragging his left leg a little."

"How long ago?"

"Maybe two hours. Not more. And he was slowed down to a walk." Dave scanned the sky. "If we travel fast we've got a chance of catching him by time it gets dark."

He fell naturally into the lead again and was startled to feel a heavy hand on his shoulder. It was Dawes. He pushed past Dave.

"Reckon we won't have any trouble following this trail," he said gruffly.

As though by a pre-arranged plan the others fell into place, boxing Dave in. They didn't need his help now, and they were taking no chance on his crossing them up. May was inside the box with Dave and she stayed there. That was some small comfort. At least she trusted him.

Then Calson moved in, gestured roughly, and May fell back. If Dave tried anything now they had a clear shot at him from all sides. Watching their grim faces, Dave was sharply aware of their hatred for him. They wouldn't hesitate to shoot on the slightest provocation.

In the meantime Dawes slogged ahead, heavy on his feet but purposeful. And fast enough. Unless Gingy Ben's leg had got better quickly they were going to catch him.

But Ben's leg was getting no better. His limp was still pronounced, its telltale drag still apparent in the snow. Dave peered ahead for the moving speck that would be Gingy Ben. It could be only a matter of minutes before they sighted him.

Ahead of them the s n o w f i e l d stretched for miles, ending in a jumble of rocks. Ben could not possibly have crossed it in the time he had.

Yet he was not in sight. The significance of that fact hit Dave suddenly.

"Hold it!" he barked.

His warning was not a second too soon. Gingy Ben's first shot whizzed through the space Dawes would have occupied had he taken another step. A second shot kicked up snow at Dave's feet. They got out of range in a hurry.

IN THE confusion Dave was able to get to May. He half shoved, half flung her back to the shelter of a low mound. Hunching down beside her, he scanned her face anxiously, made certain she was all right.

"Where is he, Dave? I didn't have a chance to see."

"Up on that rise there. He must have seen he couldn't make it so he picked a likely spot and holed up till it gets dark."

His fingers jabbed at the place, four hundred yards or so to the west. The land rose upward there for a short space before it fell away into nothingness. But Ben had chosen wisely. There were some trees and more than a few boulders for shelter.

Maney and Calson and Heller scurried across a short stretch and dropped beside Dave and the girl. They had their ries unlimbered and ready.

"Looks like we've got your friend trapped," Calson said.

"So he's still my friend?" Dave's laugh was bitter. "Well, why don't you go up there and get him?"

"That's all right," Maney countered. "We can wait it out as long as he can."

But Maney didn't sound so sure of himself. Already the western sun was low, the rising edge of the land in shadow. With darkness would come cold, and cold would bother them more than Gingy Ben.

"You'll have to do better than that to outsmart Ben," Dave told the little Irishman. "Once it gets dark he'll be on the move. We're stuck until it's light enough to follow his tracks."

"You like that, don't you?" Weiler said. He had come up, puffing after his short run.

"Shut up," Maney grunted. "So far Endless has figured it right. By morning we'll be half froze to death, and Gingy Ben will be a long way from here. You got any more ideas, Endless?"

"Maybe one," Dave admitted. "In a little while the shadow will be out this far. But Ben won't pull out until the sun is down all the way. There may be time for one of us to sneak around and get up there with him."

"Why only one of us?" Calson demanded. "Why not two or three?"

"For one thing, they might get confused in the dusk and start shooting at each other. And if they stuck close together they'd be too visible. Gingy Ben is a good shot."

They mulled that over and Dave could almost read their thoughts on their faces. It was one thing to take pot shots at Gingy Ben with a rifle, another to be up there alone with him.

By now Dawes had joined the group, his face surly and still watchful. Maney outlined Dave's plan to him and the big man nodded slowly.

"Sounds likely enough. As soon as something starts the rest can pile in. But who will it be?"

"You're wasing time," Dave told him. "There isn't one of you who can get within fifty yards of Ben without him hearing you."

"Which leaves only you."

"Which leaves only me. Although you're welcome to try. Make up your

minds. That sun is dropping fast."

Already the purple shadow was at their feet. The eastern half of the plateau still gleamed white, but that couldn't last long. When the last bit of reflected light vanished Ben would be on his way.

The men eyed each other. Any one of them who wanted the job could have it. But not one of them wanted it. Dawes and Weiler were too clumsy, the rest not confidnet enough of their skill.

"All right," Maney said. "It'll have to be Endless." His shrewd gaze was fixed on Dave. "But watch your step. If you get close to Ben don't take any chances; we won't hold it against you if you shoot him in the back."

A RIFLE wasn't going to be of much use on this job, Dave knew. He dropped the Winchester in the snow and bent to put his snowshoes back on. When he straightened he found May watching him, chewing on her lips.

"Good luck, Dave," she said slowly.

"That all you've got to say?" His voice sounded harsh in his own ears.

"For now. I saw my brother Al after Ben got through with him."

Then she turned so that her face was in shadow and he could no longer see the lines of strain, and Maney was shoving him.

Dave ran low and in the opposite direction from his goal, hoping that at this distance Gingy Ben would not be able to see him when he turned up toward the rise. Behind him guns began to pop. The men were doing their best to keep Ben occupied. They seemed to be succeeding, for there soon came the crack of Ben's rifle in reply.

Moving along an oblique line, Dave swung in toward the rise. His long, gliding steps took him swiftly from one bit of cover to the next until suddenly he found himself travelling on an upward slant.

So far the going had been easy enough. But that didn't mean a thing. Ben might have seen him and anticipated his purpose. There was no way of knowing. If Ben had seen him he'd reach the end of this trip to find himself looking down the barrel of a gun.

In the meantime he had to keep going. Here along the edge of the land the wind was cutting, coming up out of the chasms beyond with an unholy ability to chill to the bone. Rocks projected themselves into his path with s t a r t l i n g abruptness, gnarled trees reached out of the gathering dusk with twisted arms.

And all the while there was the problem of making no sound. Maney was using his head, keeping up a steady fire. But Gingy Ben was not answering that fire now. Dave wondered if the breed had already moved out. Probably not, he decided. Ben was just saving lead.

By now Dave estimated he had less than a hundred yards to go. Under cover of encroaching darkness Maney was moving closer already, spreading his men out in an arc. That wouldn't worry Ben either. He could slip through their lines like a wraith when it was dark enough.

And that time was coming soon. With the snow growing shallower every yard, Dave threw caution to the winds. He took a moment to kick his feet free from their webbed gear, moved forward again just below the very top of the rise. And overshot his mark.

When the sound came it was below him, barely loud enough to catch

his attention. A man shifting his weight on moccasined feet would make no more noise than that.

Dave found himself holding his breath. He let it out in a soundless sigh and cut back abruptly. Pausing, he peered ahead, trying to adjust his vision to the gloom, and heard Ben move again. This time it was very close. He'd have to be careful or he'd find himself tramping on Gingy Ben's heels.

Then the guns below spoke again, this time in a volley that sent lead whistling overhead, and Ben moved once more. His dark figure slid from behind a rock, merged with the shade of a tree, and showed for a moment starkly against a patch of snow. Then he hunched down behind another rock and let his gun rest on the stone.

"Drop it," Dave said.

THERE WAS the second that stretched to infinity when he thought Ben would come around shooting. Dave's trigger finger tightened on the Colt. And then the rifle was sliding over the far edge of the rock and Ben was turning with his hands high over his head.

"Shoot him in the back," Maney had said.

But you couldn't do that to a man who has saved your life. And perhaps there was another reason. Dave hadn't thought about it until now.

"I'm sorry it had to be you who got me," Gingy Ben was saying.

"So am I. But that's the way things work out."

"Yes. Maybe better this way after all."

"I'll try to see that you stand some kind of trial."

Gingy Ben's laugh was mirthless, a queer coughing that came and went.

"No trial for me, Dave. You must not have seen Benton's body."

"But why? Why, Ben?"

"Hard to say. Maybe because I am three quarters white but still not a white man. So I had to be all Indian, and more. Benton was the one selling the whiskey. But Benton was not clever enough to work it alone. I used Indian methods to question him."

Too intent on Gingy Ben's words to watch what the breed was doing, Dave had let him move up within a few feet. There was time for only a half-step back. Then Ben was on him and the gun firing harmlessly as Ben's arm swept it aside, and then the numbing impact of Ben's fist below his ear.

Falling, Dave tried to pull the breed with him and failed. There were shouts now, confused and coming from below, and then another blow that spun the gun out of Dave's grasp before he could fire again. He lashed out with a foot, met empty air and heard the patter of Gingy Ben's feet fading off into the darkness.

Dawes had a voice like the bellow of an angry bull. Maney's curses came up in a string. Dave shouted to draw them his way and they came crashing up, followed by the others.

"He got away," Dave said dully.

Their silence was more threatening than curses.

THEY WEREN'T even going to try to follow Ben. Instead, their anger was turning against Dave. He watched Maney scramble around until he came up with Ben's rifle.

"Just like that," the Irishman said. "You had the drop on him but he got away. And took your gun with him, I see. That's pretty thin, Endless."

They were moving in close on him

in a shadowy body. Maney's tone was colder than the wind.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. You played it slick, acting like you were with us as long as there was no chance of catching the breed. And then, when it turned out we had him cold, you made sure it was you who went after him."

There was no argument Dave could use against that kind of reasoning. His heart came up in his throat in a lump. Then Dawes was up close and his big fist shot out and there was no time even for fear.

Dave ducked low and the fist went over his head. The weight of his body was behind a smash that doubled Dawes over. Weiler bulled in and Dave stopped him with a chopping blow to the head. The edge of his shoulder spun Calson out of the way as Dave came around.

It was Heller who tripped him up just at the instant he broke free. Then Maney's hurtling body drove him to his knees. The rest piled in. A swinging boot sent pain coursing along Dave's ribs; his stomach sickened at a blow between his eyes.

He was being mauled, pounded, crushed beneath the weight of bodies. He felt himself lifted, flopped onto his face. His hands were being lashed behind his back.

"We ought to heave you over the brink and be done with you," Weiler stormed. "But that would cheat us out of the pleasure of stringing you up."

"First get a fire going," Maney said. "We can take care of Endless afterwards."

Nightfall had brought the cold in stronger than ever and their teeth were chattering. A man could freeze in quick time without fire. Willing hands pulled at low hanging branches, heaped them in a large pile. A match flickered.

Watching the flames climb, Dave knew he would not see that fire's last embers.

THE FIGHT had carried them up to the very edge of the abyss, and they had built the fire there. Later they would move down. Now they warmed their hands and their bodies and got a rope ready for its grisly work.

"Wait," Dave said. Their eyes swung his way. "I had a chance to talk to Ben."

"That was friendly."

Maney had a grim sense of humor. Perhaps he and the others were right Dave thought. He shouldn't have given Ben a chance to trick him. Maybe they were right when they said you couldn't trust a man with Indian blood in him. Ben might have made up a story on the spur of the moment. But even now Dave could not believe that. He plunged on.

"He admitted he killed Al. But he did it because he found out Al was delivering whiskey to the reservation."

May Benton whirled on him like a she-bear defending her young.

"That's dirty, Dave! That's a dirty thing to do, blacken a dead man's name just to save your own hide!"

"Pay him no mind, Miss Benton," Weiler said. "A man who will run with Indians and breeds is no better than one himself. There's nothing low he wouldn't do."

"Right!" It was a chorus of doom.

Then they were moving away from the fire toward Dave. He lay and watched them come on puposefully, Calson trailing the long rope behind him. Dave stiffened and felt the cold ground press harder agaisnt his back.

They were close now and bending over him. Dave's foot lashed up and out desperately. And missed. Warmth had loosened them and made them supple. Heller dodged back, kicked the foot aside and leaped in nimbly to flip Dave over on his back.

"Won't do you any good to fuss," Maney said. "Take it like a man."

He grabbed a fistful of Dave's hair and hauled him to his feet. Dave tried to pull away and Dawes seized him from behind and held him fast.

"Hold it," May Benton said.

She came up close, her rifle steady in her hands. It menaced them all.

"I can't do it," she whispered fiercely. "I thought I could, but I guess I love you too much, Dave." The rifle swung in a short arc. "Let him loose."

Had she stayed further away she might have turned the trick. But she was too close. Weiler's big hand clubbed the rifle from her grasp. The group moved on.

"You should have run with your friend when you had the chance, Endless," Weiler said. "Or let him take what was coming to him. That's what the breed would have done to you."

"Wrong, Weiler," came the voice of Gingy Ben.

THEY WERE frozen, rooted in their tracks. From somewhere beyond the circle of firelight the voice had come, but it was impossible to know just where. Maney stirred, drifted cautiously.

"No," Gingy Ben said. "Don't move. I can kill you all. I can see you but you can't see me."

Nor could they. He was close by but invisible, just beyond the rim of light.

"I wanted to finish my story, Dave," he said. "Habit made me fight my friend. But he is still my friend."

"It won't change anything for you, Ben," Dave said. "You killed Al Benton."

"I know. My life is forfeit. But where would I run? Maybe you can do something. There are others to think of—my people. Weiler is the man, Dave."

"Then I was right all along."

"Yes. Benton told me. Weiler supplied the whiskey; Benton got it during the day and moved it at night. Weiler is behind all the troubles."

"He's lying," Weiler said quickly.

But the truth was written on his face. He read their expressions as they turned toward him. For such a big man he moved quickly. His gun came out smoothly and he was close to Dave.

"Don't be a fool, Weiler," Dave said. "I don't care about your skin. All you can get is a jail sentence."

"The white man's justice," came Gingy Ben's taunt. "Not for Weiler."

They held their breaths, waiting for the shot, and suddenly Dave realized that Ben had no gun. He was bluffing. And Weiler's arm was swinging up.

Gingy Ben came out of the darkness in a rush that took them all by surprise. His hurtling body cleared the fire at an angle they were not expecting.

Surprise and sudden fear made Weiler shift. He came around Dave directly into Gingy Ben's path and fired wildly. The shot went over Ben's head.

And then he was in low and his arms were around Weiler and the force of his drive was lifting the big man and carrying him backwards and backwards and then up over the edge of the rise and into space.

They fell together, Gingy Ben silently and Weiler with a long scream of terror that went on and on and on until it seemed it would never stop. And then it stopped.

For a long moment the men remained motionless. Someone cursed and the curse broke the spell. Maney looked at Dave, gestured and made a choking sound.

"He was a murderer," Maney said. "But he was good enough to be any man's friend. How big a fool can a man be, Endless? I was wrong all the way."

"Let it be," Dave told him. "What's past is past."

He waited patiently while May untied the rope on his wrists. In the end she had proved her love. And Gingy Ben had proved his friendship.

If a man had the patience to wait all things might work out. He might even see the day when each man was judged for himself, when his tribe and his color counted for nothing, when a Gingy Ben did not have to give his life to prove a point.

SHEEPHERDERS WAR

BY EMILE EARLE

(concluded from page 131)

Angus McFarland appeared startled, his lips twitched, but he met the issue like the gallant gentleman he was.

"In which case, laddie, you will be doubly welcome."

Bruce shot a grateful look at his father. He continued:

"And, father, Blake is engaged to Miss Spaulding; they will be married at the same time. But first he and I will look around for a small ranch somewhere and go into business together—cattle."

The elder McFarland pondered this, battling with his Scottish thrift, and at last when he spoke it was with an air of reckless resolve. In his anguish his usual faultless diction went overboard.

"You ken that sma' ranch I have at Running Water, Bruce? 'Tis not like the Triple X, 'tis true, but 'tis a tidy spread, well stocked, for a' o' that. I am getting a wee bit auld, laddie, and it might be that you and Blake could take it over." McFarland hesitated, then ended with firm decision: "To be paid for, of course; to be paid for **in full** when ye are out of the woods."

"Ha! Ees not that jus' gran'?" the generous Felipe crowed.

Bruce looked at the two girls, then at Blake, then back to his father. His eyes were eloquent, and held a trace of moisture.

"Thank you, father," he said huskily.

Angus McFarland sniffed the fragrance of the rare liquid within his glass to hide his own unwonted emotion. Then he lifted it on high.

"To your continued good health, Don Guadalupe, and to the bonny brides."

Felipe, naturally, had the last word.

"And to theem bonnee sheep, by Joe!" he amended.

REFLECTIONS *from the*

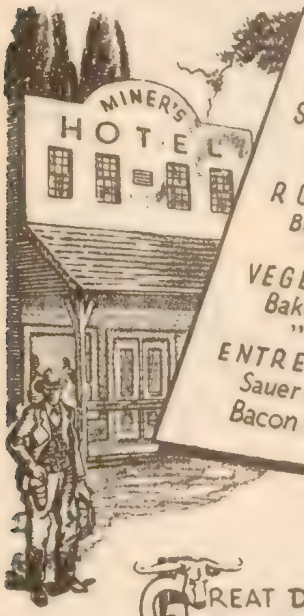
Joaquin Murrieta . . . MEXICAN BANDIT, SWORE VENGEANCE ON ALL AMERICANS AFTER HIS WIFE AND BROTHER HAD BEEN BRUTALLY SLAIN BY RUFFIANS IN 1850. FOR **3 YEARS** HE AND HIS GANG TERRORIZED THE INHABITANTS OF CALIFORNIA, **MURDERING** MEN WITH RECKLESS ABANDON. WAS FINALLY HUNTED DOWN AND **KILLED JULY 25, 1853**. HIS HEAD BEING REMOVED AND PRESERVED IN ALCOHOL AS PROOF OF HIS DEATH, WAS LATER EXHIBITED IN SAN FRANCISCO.

A **GOLD NUGGET** WEIGHING **214 POUNDS**, VALUED AT $44,000, WAS ACCIDENTLY DISCOVERED BY A LAD NAMED HANCE AT CARSON HILL, CALIFORNIA WHILE FOLLOWING A STRAY MULE. HIS FIND STARTED THE FAMOUS MORGAN MINE - IN WHICH ONE BLAST OF DYNAMITE PRODUCED **$110,000 IN GOLD**

WEST'S EARLY DAYS

DURING GOLD RUSH DAYS OF '49 IN CALIFORNIA, **FOOD WAS GOOD BUT PLAIN,** AND PRICES HIGH. **GOLD DUST** WAS WIDELY USED AS A MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE, MOST HOTELS AND BUSINESS HOUSES KEPT SCALES FOR WEIGHING IT.

BELOW IS A TYPICAL HOTEL MENU OF THE GOLD RUSH DAYS.



• • MENU • •

MINER'S HOTEL

SOUP
Bean $1.00
Oxtail (short) 1.00
ROAST
Beef, Mexican (prime cut) 1.50
" Upalong 1.00
VEGETABLES
Baked Beans (plain) .75
" " (greased) 1.00
ENTREES
Sauer Kraut 1.00
Bacon (Fried) 1.00

MARIPOSA - JAN. 1850

Hash (Low Grade) $ .75
" (18 Karets) 1.00
GAME
Codfish Balls (per pair) .75
Grizzly (Roast) 1.00
Jackass Rabbit (whole) 1.00
PASTRY
Rice Pudding (plain) .75
" " (with molasses) 1.00
SQUARE MEAL WITH DESSERT $ 3.00

PAYABLE IN ADVANCE - GOLD SCALE AT END OF BAR

GREAT **DROVES OF CATTLE** CAME NORTH FROM THE SOUTHWEST IN THE **1860's** AND **70's**, SOMETIMES BEING DRIVEN **1000 MILES**. THEY FOLLOWED THE **CHISHOLM TRAIL** AND ITS WESTERN BRANCHES, STRETCHING FROM TEXAS TO KANSAS.

5,250,000 HEAD OF CATTLE AND **1,000,000** HORSES WERE DRIVEN NORTH IN 20 YEARS FOLLOWING THE CIVIL WAR • • •

Hal Ripley leaned against the wagon and introduced himself to the girl in calico . . .

BUSTER'S LAST STAND

By J. J. ALLERTON

Filming Custer's Last Stand was more of a problem than it seemed, for the Indians had their own ideas about Chief Sitting Bull

GORDON JOSEPH looked over the scene and smiled with satisfaction. Perfect, he thought. A swell of personal pride filled his bosom. A. P. I., Apex Productions Incorporated, would be able to point to this production and say, well done. Yep, he thought, as Willis, the assistant director came up, a sheaf of papers in his hand, **The Last Trail** was going to be the best Western ever produced if he had anything to say about it.

"Well, Joe . . . ?" Gordon asked, as the other shuffled beside him.

"They're all set out there. Mike said they're ready to roll. Only thing's holdin' up the works, these Injuns . . ."

"Indians? I thought Mulhavey ironed that out with the chief?"

"That's what he thought too. But it seems he's wrong. Big Chief Sit-On-Stool is doin' just that."

"H'mm! Okay. Give the crew five and I'll see what I can do," Gordon said.

There had been many difficulties, Gordon thought as he moved toward the huge tent which had been set up for the taking of the few interiors they needed. One of those difficulties had been Chief Thunder Cloud. From the beginning he had not cooperated as he should have. Nor was it a question of money. There was something stuck in that Redman's craw, Gordon decided.

Mulhavey, the crew boss, and his second in command were standing just outside the huge canvas. They heard Gordon's steps and turned, and seeing him, came over in quickstep.

"What's wrong now?" Gordon asked.

"Thunder Cloud!" Mulhavey said. "Those braves won't work without his okay. And I can't get him to okay 'em . . ."

"What's the trouble? And don't tell me money. Come on! Give!"

"The old coot says we're goin' to make fools of his tribe."

This, Gordon thought, is what makes directors grey and old before their time. If the stars aren't showing temperament, then something comes along that is just as bad. Like this Indian. Gordon had talked to him, and all the satisfaction he got was a few grunts which could be interpreted in any way Gordon chose. He sighed deeply, pulled a smoke from a leather case and stepped around the two men and into the huge tent. Thunder Cloud would be in that part of the tent devoted to dressing rooms and wardrobe . . .

HAL RIPLEY leaned against a wheel of the Conestoga wagon

and grinned down at the pretty blonde in the poke bonnet and calico dress. She too was smiling.

". . . So I ride up . . . of course I'm covered with dust, and fair to knocked out from it all, and I jump off the nag and run up to Custer and say: 'Sir! General Terry sends his love . . .'"

Bright laughter poured from the pretty lips of the girl at the words.

"You are a fool, Hal," she said.

There was a wry touch to his smile now, and darkness filled his eyes.

"I suppose I am. About the only thing that's happened to me that's nice since I came to the gilded city, is you . . ."

"Don't be bitter, Hal," she said, suddenly falling into his mood.

"I'm not!" he hastened to say. "But Jill . . . After all I didn't come to Hollywood fresh from Rube's Corner. I was the lead in a fair-to-middlin' play on Broadway. And I do have six years of professional experience behind me. So I get a contract from Apex. And for eight months I wait on call . . ."

"You got paid for it, didn't you?" Jill Valentine asked.

"Hang the dough!" he broke out savagely. "Maybe that's the trouble? When I ask around for something, that's what I get for an answer, you're gettin' paid, ain't you? Sure I am. But for what? A Sergeant-trooper's part in a Western? One ham-line and a fade-out! My Hollywood career."

"You didn't expect the part of Custer, did you?" she asked sharply.

"No, I didn't," Hal said. "But there are other parts . . ."

She was angry then. Hal was sounding like a spoiled kid now. She thought of her own career. A pony line at a famous New York night spot and a talent scout who saw her. That was the beginning. She photographed well, had a voice which had an oddly vibrant quality to it and after a year of very minor roles, she was given her chance at something better.

Now in **The Last Trail** she had been given a major part. She played second lead to the star, Gloria Samson. But she had attained her stature only through hard work and hours of study. And at last the studio, and particularly Gordon Joseph, had begun to recognise her talents.

Her head had dropped as she thought of her past. It lifted and her level grey eyes saw that Hal had turned aside and was staring between the gap of the two wagons, and was looking toward a trooper on a horse atop a hill a hundred yards off.

"It's still not too late," she said softly. "I don't know what's on your mind, Hal, but I'm sure if you saw Gordon Joseph and really gave him a sales talk, he'd see eye to eye with you . . . It wouldn't be the first time he shot off the cuff."

The name acted with electrifying effect on the man in the trooper's uniform. He snapped stiffly erect, glowered down at Jill and grated harshly:

"That pompous . . ." He stopped, the word he had on the tip of his tongue refusing to go beyond. He substituted another. "That **jerk.**"

"That's not fair!" she broke in. "He's one heck of a director. And insofar as I'm concerned he's never failed to at least listen to what I've had to offer.

"What's more, the only scenes shot so far have been interiors at the studio. The script isn't inflexible . . . Ohh! What's the use?" she ended on a bitter note as she saw her words were making no impression whatever

on Hal Ripley. "Why don't you go, go to . . . Oh, go to Custer . . ."

Ripley's eyes blazed in anger as he looked upon the stiffly erect back, the straight line of shoulders of Jill Valentine as she marched away from him toward wardrobe. A long sigh of despair came from him as he too turned and started toward the group of extras gathered for the shot of Custer's last stand Gordon Joseph had planned on doing while the light was right.

BUT IT seemed nothing else was right. So Joseph was discovering in his interview with the aged chieftan Thunder Cloud. The two were seated facing each other across a narrow strip of bare earth which separated the two kegs they were using for chairs.

Gordon Joseph was racking his brain, searching for a clue, a single something which could break through the stolid reserve of this old man, whose wrinkled face and hidden eyes which lay between folds of dry-as-dust lids, looked like the face of one of the Buddhas, Joseph collected. Joseph had tried everything. At least everything he could think of. Suddenly the shadow of a smile came and went on his lips. There might be one thing more . . .

"Chief Thunder Cloud," he began in slow, rather melodramatic tones. "I have always heard of the integrity of the redmen. I have heard it said that when an Indian gives his word, only death can stop his promise being fulfilled." Joseph's voice went down an octave into a sepulchural depth which would have brought a mortician to envy. "Am I to understand what I have heard is false? Am I to understand that the Indian's word means nothing . . .?"

It seemed to the white man that the eyes of the man across from him flickered in an odd manner for a bare instant. Then the wrinkled lids were the same as before.

"I have given my word," Thunder Cloud began in his hoarse though oddly young voice, "that the men of my tribe will ride for you. For they are descended from the same men who rode against Custer that afternoon . . . The glory of that day will live again, if even for a fleeting instant . . . But they will ride only when I give the word!"

From the opening phrase Gordon Joseph sat as one stunned. The only other time Thunder Cloud had opened his mouth it was to utter monosyllabic grunts which one could interpret as one wished. These polished phrases, poetically coined. The movie director sat as if in a dream, as the other continued.

"By the signs in the heavens, by the devices of the medicine men, I have been shown that one comes. I wait his coming. On his arrival will I give the word!"

It was said with an air of finality which brooked no further talk.

Gordon Joseph was blasted out of the role he had assumed. His voice was shrill and decidedly unlike his natural one as he yelped:

"Hey! What's this about medicine men and signs from heaven?"

He was shooting against a blank wall. The aged Indian's head sank lower and lower until the point of his chin was resting against his chest. And Gordon Joseph knew he was licked. There was no place he could get Indians except through Thunder Cloud. The Indian Agency had been very careful to explain the Chief's position.

Slowly, the rather heavy body of

the movie man lifted from the keg and straightened. A bitter look shot out of eyes which looked pain-filled, at the Indian. But the Chief didn't notice. It was as if he had completely forgotten the white man's existence. Then the heavy shoulders sagged and Joseph turned and walked with slow steps out into the sun . . .

"MISTER Joseph! Mister Joseph!" a voice broke into the director's revery. He turned and gave the approaching trooper a blank stare. He would have continued his steps had not the other blocked his path.

"Could I have a minute of your time?" Hal Ripley asked.

Joseph turned a wondering glance at the tall man facing him. He recalled seeing this man before . . . He looked more closely at the long lean face, bronzed as an Indian's, and bearing a further resemblance with the dark eyes set under crags of brows, and the long aquiline nose and strong, thin lips . . . Suddenly he remembered. Ripley was his name. He had a bit part.

"What is it?" he asked curtly.

"I have an idea that might be of help, sir," Ripley said in swift accents. It was a job even talking to this man, this strutting peacock.

"Oho! So now **you** have ideas!" Joseph suddenly shouted, all the spleen coming out in a torrent directed to Ripley. "So now we have **extras** with **ideas.** Look, you damned fool! This picture's being shelved. D'you hear, shelved! So go on back to your . . ."

He almost choked on the last word. Ripley's hand had shot out with the speed of a fighter shooting a straight left, and had thrown five fingers about the fatty throat of the director.

"I-knew-it!" Ripley gritted through set lips. "I shouldn't have listened to her. I ought to shake the heel right out of you . . ."

Joseph's fingers were clawing at Ripley's, trying to pry the terrible grip away from his throat. But he needn't have worried. In a second they spread and breath flowed back to the tortured throat.

"You're crazy!" Joseph gasped. "You're fired. You're nuts. Get out of here . . ."

The shouting voice and the threatening g e s t u r e which followed brought people on the run since the scene was but a few yards from the tent. Several of the extras grabbed Ripley and pulled him from Joseph. One of them, dressed in the uniform of a trooper, whose face bore a made-up wound, knew Ripley.

"Hey, 'Buster,'" he asked as he pinioned one of Ripley's arms. "What goes?"

Others, recognizing the two and who saw some part of what had happened, shouted to those who hadn't:

"Buster Ripley and the boss . . . Looks like a fight . . ."

Among those who came to look was Chief Thunder Cloud.

Oddly enough, the calmest of the lot, with the exception of the Indian, was Ripley. He was just disgusted.

"Everything's okay," Ripley said. "He won't get hurt . . ."

But Joseph thought otherwise.

"He's a murderer. Don't let him loose. He'll kill me. I know he will . . ."

"Aah, shut up!" Ripley said.

A ripple of ill-repressed laughter went up at the sight of Joseph backing away from the restrained trooper. As if aware of the crowd for the first time Joseph turned a brick-red countenance toward the mob and

shouted:

"Back to your places everybody! Willis! Mulhavey . . . Get these men out of here."

And as the crowd broke and started toward the shallow valley which was to be the scene of the Custer battle, Chief Thunder Cloud stepped forward and addressed Joseph:

"My men will go to work now . . ."

Forgotten was the argument. Forgotten the fact that Ripley had attempted mayhem. Joseph knew only that something had happened which had made Thunder Cloud change his mind. The picture was saved. A smile of sheer delight broke on the plump countenance and Joseph litterally screamed for his assistants:

"Get the crews ready . . . Willis! You know what I want. Have those men we picked dressed for the part . . ."

"They are," Willis replied. "We can do a couple of takes anyway. How about doing the scene with Sitting Bull?"

"No! Tomorrow will do for that. The light's bad already, but for the mob business and the massed Indians on the heights we've got enough light. . . ."

Willis nodded and sped off to impart the information to the cameramen and the others. Joseph stood, smiling and rubbing his hands. Suddenly he felt the awareness of someone standing close. He looked to his right and saw that Ripley was standing there.

The smile went away. He noticed, however, that Ripley was now ill at ease. He was shuffling his feet and biting his lower lip.

"I thought I fired you?" Joseph asked.

"Yep, you did," Ripley replied.

"H'm! Maybe I was a little to blame . . . Nerves! This damned business with those Indians. I never know what's with them. First they don't want to play, then they do. And they change their minds for no reason I can understand."

"That's because you don't understand them," Ripley said.

"H'mn! Well, you had something to tell me. What was it?"

"I'd like for you to give me a chance at something else, sir," Ripley said. "Now wait! Before you blow your top again, let me have my say. I think I can do Sitting Bull . . ."

Joseph's eyes held a suddenly thoughtful gleam. The part of Sitting Bull had been a sore one with him. He had cast several actors for the role and had finally to choose a man well-known for his portrayal of Indian roles. Yet, even as he granted the actor the role, Joseph felt an instant of misgiving. There was a reason for it. The whole business of Josephs' wanting to **The Last Trail** was in his thinking after reading a history of Custer, that Custer was a fool. Further, that the Indians had been muchly maligned, and that the movie could be made top-notch fare, were a different picture painted of them.

George Harrison, who was to play Sitting Bull was used to the old-type delineation of Indian roles.

But when Joseph spoke again, it had nothing to do with acting:

"Buster Ripley? Where have I heard that name? Ahh! Sure. Buster Ripley, the All-American football star. That's it!"

Hal Ripley felt a second of despair. Anger started a new rise to his throat but he forced it down and began anew:

"Right. But this isn't a football drama. I did six years on Broadway

. . . And to get to the point I don't think Harrison is doing Sitting Bull right."

". . . Buster Ripley! And here all the time and I didn't know it," Joseph continued, as if what the other had said had passed over his head. "Why I saw you run through that Stanford team like you had wings. Yeah man! I won five hundred from Ed Mann over at Universal that day. Which reminds me! I've got a pic to make. Now that Thunder Cloud has okayed his braves. Look, Ripley. Tell you what I'll do. That scene with Custer you do. Well, we'll leave that in and then I'll throw in a close-up of a hand-to-hand fight. How's that?"

"That's just dandy," Ripley said, and turned on his heel and strode off.

Had he waited another two seconds he would have seen Jill Valentine come from the wardrobe section and move toward the chubby director. Joseph was still staring at the figure of the trooper when Jill touched his shoulder. He turned and at sight of the piquant face of the girl a smile of delight broke on his face.

"Aah! Jill, my girl. Too bad. You just missed your Jack."

Her face reddened and as quickly paled.

"He's not my Jack!" she said shortly.

"No? My error. Nice kid, if he ever gets to control that temper. Had an idea, he did . . ."

"You mean he asked you for another role . . .?" there was sudden delight in her voice.

"Yes," Joseph said and looked past her shoulder. "He wants to play Sitting Bull."

"Sitting Bull!" Why that's ridiculous! Harrison's all lined up for that. And George Harrison's fame was made on his Indian roles. I thought he wanted to do something else . . ."

"I thought you didn't give a hang what he wants?" Joseph asked straight faced as a poker player with an ace-high straight flush.

Her lips parted twice and a third time before words came out. And when they did it was in a small, sorry voice:

"He's such a fool, daddy-Joseph. He thinks nobody but he has the answers. He gives me a pain. But I gotta admit I kinda go for him."

"Well, honey," Joseph said. "Maybe he has the right answer this time. We'll see . . ."

HIGH ON the hill, three hundred Indian braves, all in the war dress of Siouxs, waited the signal for the charge. They sat their restless mounts in unperturbed ease. Their faces and chests were painted in some colors which were strange to their tribe, but necessary, since the picture was in Technicolor.

There were four among them who were not Indians. They were whites dressed as Sioux. These four were the 'directors' of the charge. They gave the signals and saw to it the charge did not get out of hand. Everything was in readiness.

Below, in a copse of trees, Joseph, Willis and one camera crew were also waiting. There was only this single bit of business on the day's schedule, and the men below were becoming impatient, for the light had to be just so for color work. There were four other cameras and sound equipment planted in other vantages to get every angle of the charge, but Joseph and his underlings were at the best angle.

"Well, what are they waiting for?"

Gordon Joseph asked with a show of impatience.

"Sitting Bull, I imagine," Willis replied. "Hal Tate and his boys are up there on that hump of grass . . . see 'em . . .? They get the Chief as he rides up . . ."

"So let's go!" Joseph said. "Where is that Harrison?"

Another five minutes went by. Joseph looked at his watch and exploded:.

"**Damn**! Willis! Get down there and see what's wrong. If that old jerk doesn't show up, the whole afternoon's work will go to waste. This scene'll take more than one 'take."

Willis ran for the jeep parked close by and shot out for the huge canvas tent below. He was lost to sight in a few seconds. More time went by. Then a cloud of dust came streaking up toward the waiting crew. And in a few seconds Willis swept the jeep around in a sharp curve and slammed the brakes on. Even before the wheels stopped rolling he was out of the car and racing toward Joseph.

"Harrison! He's—he's been kidnapped . . . !" Willis yelled as he raced forward.

In an instant Willis was the center of an excited and curious group. They were all talking at once. At last Joseph managed to make himself heard.

"Hold it! **Hold it!**"

Silence fell swiftly.

"Now," the director spoke in more normal tones. "What's all this about?"

"I got down to his dressing room, boss," Willis began, his eyes alight and his chest heaving in excitement. "The door was open. So I walk right in. Holy Hedy! The place looked like a cyclone hit it. Furniture wrecked, his dresser tipped over, and blood

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spots on the wall."

The men looked at each other. Harrison was a big man, and was known to be something of a fighter.

Joseph motioned with his head for one of the men to get the station wagon up there. The rest streamed for the big trucks, leaving only a skeleton crew to guard the cameras and sound equipment. In a few minutes Joseph, with Willis at his side was shooting down the light grade toward the tent a half mile away.

It was just as Willis had described.

It was then Gordon Joseph showed why he had been given the powers he had. In moments like these, Joseph showed his true colors. Within a few moments he had men out searching the immediate vicinity, other men with the aid of a large number of the Indians looking further afield. But his mind was not alone occupied with the disappearance of Harrison. There was something odd about the whole thing, Joseph thought.

There was no valid reason for his suspecting Thunder Cloud's having something to do with it, but he did. The old chief was seated near the entrance to the commissary. He didn't look up at Joseph's approach.

"Thunder Cloud," the director made no bones of his suspicion. "What do you know about this?"

A blank stare was all he got from the hooded lids which barely lifted at the other's words.

"Look, Thunder Cloud!" Joseph said gently. Yet there was a hidden menace in the gentle manner. "What made you change your mind about letting your men go to work?" Well . . . ?"

Not a flicker of interest or awareness showed on the leathery face of the Indian.

"Okay! So you won't talk. But get this! Kidnapping is a serious offense. And if I find that you had something to do with this I'll see to it you're prosecuted. Furthermore, Hal Ripley won't get the role of Sitting Bull even if we don't find Harrison . . ."

That did it. At least the eyes of the other opened wide.

"The concern of the white man is great," Thunder Cloud said. "And reasonable. Yet I think the missing man is safe. As for this Ripley, he is your affair. This I know. Without a living symbol my men will not perform for the cameras . . ."

The two looked at each other in a silent moment. Neither gave an inch. It was strange that a face so full and plump as Joseph's could look so suddenly granite in its composition. The dawn of respect lay suddenly deep in Thunder Cloud's eyes.

"My men go back to the reservation tomorrow afternoon," the Indian said abruptly, and as though in dismissal.

"As you want!" Joseph said, and turned on his heel and walked away.

AL RIPLEY and Jill Valentine, dressed in sweaters and slacks, stood in the deep shadows of two of the Conestoga wagons. They had been talking of the odd disappearance of Harrison, who was still not found.

" . . . I simply can't imagine who could have done it or why," Jill said.

"I can't imagine why," Hal said. "But I think I know who."

"You **do**? Who?"

"Thunder Cloud."

"How do you know?"

"We-ll. Look, Jill . . . I never told you much about me. All you know is

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that my name's Hal Ripley, that I was a famous football player, that I was on Broadway and that I love you . . ."

He stopped then, his mouth open wide and his eyes suddenly staring in consternation. It was the first time he'd put what was on his mind, into words. The effect on her was as startling. Before he was quite aware of her intentions, she stood on tip-toe, reached forward and, pulling his head down, implanted a kiss full on his mouth.

There was an interval of whispered sweetnesses, then Hal spoke again:

" . . . What very few people know is that I am a full-blooded Indian."

She could only stare in surprise. He continued:

" . . . That's why I asked for the part of Sitting Bull. I know the Indian's ways. And to show you how well I know them, I'll bet I can tell you where they hid Harrison."

"Where?"

He turned her so she was facing the wagons. She turned her face to his.

"You mean in one of these . . .?"

"Sure. Those braves have been all about here. They might not act as though they were aware of anything. But there's little they miss. They must have noticed that these wagons are not in use and that nobody bothers looking into them.

"What better place to hide someone . . . ?"

Without a word, Jill climbed up onto the tongue, and parting first one flap, then the other, peered into the dark interiors. She didn't have to see the man, trussed up on the bed of the wagon. She could hear his stertorous breathing.

Hal Ripley was right.

AN HOUR later, Joseph called a conference in his tent. All the principals were there. And besides them, Hal Ripley had been asked to come. They were waiting the arrival of Thunder Cloud. Ripley and Jill stood side by side and watched the director pace back and forth. Harrison, of course, was the center of attraction.

" . . . Sure. I fought back," he said in answer to a question. "But I didn't have a chance. Then they threw a blindfold over me and the next thing I knew Jill and Ripley were freeing me . . ."

"Where is Thunder Cloud?" Joseph demanded.

As though in answer the tent flap parted and the chief strode in, followed by several of his men. In Thunder Cloud's arms was what looked like the full regalia of a chief.

Disregarding the others, Thunder Cloud strode directly to Hal and without a word handed the other what he had in his arms.

"Hey!" Joseph demanded. "What does here?"

"This is what Sitting Bull wore that afternoon," Thunder Cloud said, as he turned his attention to the director. "It is only fitting that a descendant of his should wear the feathers of a chief."

"Descendant?" Harrison broke in. "Sitting Bull's descendants are well-known . . . This man is no . . ."

"Mighty Chief," Thunder Cloud spoke directly to Hal then. "Dress yourself in these garments."

And when Hal had done so, the Indian said:

"There, white men. There is a living picture of Sitting Bull. I know, for thought I was but a young man I was with him. Ask him the tribe he is from . . ."

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"The Nez Perce," Hal replied. "And Thunder Cloud is right. Sitting Bull and Chief Joseph met in Canada. He fell in love with my grandmother and married her. I am a descendant of Sitting Bull."

But Gordon Joseph was already deep in the publicity value of what had happened. A grandson of Sitting Bull playing the role. If only Hal knew the role . . .

He did.

HE Last Trail was acclaimed by critic and audience alike as a great picture. And special plaudits were heaped on Hal Ripley for his portrayal of Sitting Bull. There was one scene, however, that the audiences never saw. That was the final scene of the picture, where after the last of Custer's men had fallen, Sitting Bull leaped from his horse and ran to a girl in a calico dress and poke bonnet, standing by the side of the director. The cameras were not grinding when he whirled her off her feet, and the sound was not on as he whispered:

"And now that I'm a star, will you marry me?"

Nor did anyone hear the reply:

"Star or walk-on, you're mine, sweetheart . . ."

(The End.)

THE LONE EXPLORER

By H. R. STANTON

FATHER FRANCISCO GARCES, a Franciscan missionary, made extensive explorations down the Gila Valley and into the trans-olorado wilderness. In 1771, with no other companion except his guardian angel, Garces followed the course of the Gila to the Colorado, and went on down that stream almost to the head of the gulf; then took a northwesterly course across the Lower Californian deserts to San Jacome. Beyond the camp at San Jacome rose a dark, rugged meaning Black Mountain. Near this peak ran the historic New River of present day Imperial Valley. Garces went through this

valley till he sighted the high wall of the San Jacinto Mountains and found two openings through the range. By his exploration, he made two invaluable contributions to the opening of the Sonora-California trail: he discovered a route from the lower Colorado River to the back side of the San Jacinto Mountains; and he won the good will of the chief of the Yuma tribe at the strategic junction of the Gila and the Colorado. The key to all overland travel between Sonora and the coast lay in the hands of this extraordinary Indian chief, Salvador Palma.

Father Garces had a gift of getting along well with the Indians. He would sit cross-legged around the fire with them at night, talking with them with serenity and deliberation. Even though their food was filthy as the Indians themselves, the father ate it heartily, and said it was fine and good for the stomach. With the Indian "El Peregrino" and a heathen Mojave as his only companions, Garces plunged into the Colorado desert where no white man had ever been before. The first part of his journey took him up the river as far as the Mojave villages. Then he went over the Mojave trail to San Gabriel. Thus Father Garces broke a new path from the Colorado basin to the Spanish settlements in California.

But the hardy friar was still restless and filled with the wanderlust and was eager to open ore trails. From San Gabriel he went north by way of San Fernando and the Santa Clara valley; he found his way through the Sierra Madre and the Tehachapi mountains, and finally came into the valley of the San Joaquin. He proceeded down that valley till the northern boundary of Kern County, and then he turned back. He crossed the southern wall of the Sierra by way of the Tehachapi Pass, and found his way across hundreds of miles of unmarked desert to the Mojave villages. He went on to the Hopi pueblos in Arizona and finally returned to his starting point at the junction of the Gila and the Colorado. Few lone white men have ever equalled this remarkable feat of pioneering. It was one of the epic journeys in all North American History.

VIGILANTE VENGEANCE

By FRANCES YERXA

FOR A TIME, during the early settling of the western territories, the informal organizations of justice, the "vigilantes" served a useful purpose. In a country where the only law was that of the six-gun, justice wasn't always given the wronged. In fact, it depended more on the speed of a man's draw than on the strength of his moral convictions.

Because such rapid-fire "law" often degenerated into sheer lawlessness, and be-

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cause there were rarely formal sheriffs and courts, citizens could only break up gangs by the ancient and honorable method of banding themselves together and acting as judge, jury and executioner after they had caught the offenders.

The formation of citizen's posses and vigilante committees, then was a legitimate way to combat the ever-growing depredations of lawless men during the building of the rich and wealthy west. Drum-head hourts had much to recommend them.

Unfortunately, shrewd and clever politicians, cattlemen, and even crooks and gunmen themselves, could often turn such high-speed justice to their own ends. Mob violence and mob justice, which exist even today in certain parts of the country, do not necessarily guarantee justice for the guilty, nor do they even guarantee that the guilty will be caught and punshied.

The Western historian, Joe Carrolton, often discussed, in his book "The Vigilante," the horrible crimes committed in the name of justice. He tells of the town of Sulpher Gap, now no longer on the maps, where gamblers, bent on staging a local bank robbery, carefully layed their plans. They robbed the bank with their strong gunmen. Prior to the robbery they planted gold dust from the bank, in the camp of two prospectors. After the robbery was discovered, angry miners formed a vigilante committee, determined to get their money back and tc do justice.

Carefully lead by cunning and unscrupulous mob leaders — the gamblers' representatives started the hullaballoo — they came on the camp of the sleeping and innocent prospectors. A quick search disclosed the gold sack, a drum-head court was set up, and the two frightened, pleading men, implicated of course beyond relief, were quickly tried. Nothing they could say or do availed them a bit. An hour after they had been "caught" they were swinging from a tree!

Three months later, the gang was broken up in the course of some involved chicanery and one of the boys talked. He clarified the so-called bank robbery. Of course it was too late then.

If this thing had gone on indefinitely, anarchy, pure and sheer anarchy might have resulted. Fortunately organized law, once encouraged, filtered through most western communities pretty speedily. Who will ever forget the role played by the Texas Rangers? Lesser known bodies of lawmen did the same as they. However, in spite of their sometimes ghastly role, everything considered, vigilantes were once necessary.

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